REUNION

A Dadrius Zine

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Please enjoy this collection, brought to you by mods NerdKenz, Kolapon and Tsu.

VSESHLO

A NIGHT SO DARK AND HOLLOW

mirrorbird

Even as the kid appears in the alley, his hand-me-down cloak flapping in the evening breeze, everything is still fine. He levels his strange staff—there's something unsettling about it, has been for decades, but Darius has long since learned not to ask—and declares the three of them under arrest, and the situation is still very much recoverable. It's cuter than it is threatening, by a long mile. The kid's bright, sure, but that's not the same as *smart;* they'll be out of here long before he can connect the dots on what he's seeing. Raine's already going for their recorder.

Then Eda's human lunges out of the shadows and fully tackles him, buying them all the time in the world. It's annoying to have to bail out again—this was already a scheduling nightmare, and while Darius goes to great pains to make it look easy, those circles are a *bitch* to get right—but that's the whole of it.

He feels bad, a little—a still-new feeling, and one he will not be interrogating today—watching the kid spin in circles from a nearby rooftop while Raine rubs the smoke from their glasses Eber idly files his claws on the shingles. He catches both of them watching him, then rolls his eyes and scoffs, turning back just in time for the little prince to stomp his little foot right on the vial. The vial that none of them, fully-grown responsible adult coven-head witches, had thought to pick up.

The circle activates. In a flash of sickly yellow light, the kid and his unwanted pet human are gone.

The situation, Darius reflects, ignoring his own pounding heart as he meets the stares of his colleagues with a glare of his own, is no longer recoverable.It's not that they can't get him out; that would be absurd, and Darius refuses to entertain a reality where that's the case.

But he's been holding out on them, his comrades in arms, and it's that knowledge that grips his tongue as Raine starts to babble about next steps and recovery plans and how somehow this scenario never came up in their weeks and weeks of brain-wracking. He knows a little—not enough to preclude the need for this plan, risky and ridiculous as it is, and so he hasn't felt the need to share, but more than nothing—about what the kid is going to see in there.

What he doesn't know, can't know, is whether he'll ever actually see the kid again. Or, if he somehow evades Belos—if he's allowed to live, knowing what he's about to know, which even in the depths of his denial Darius can't call a high-percentage outcome—if the kid is ever going to want to see *him.*

———

Hunter has had a lot of worst days of his life.

He doesn't think about it, or tries not to—no, he succeeds, he always succeeds, *he has to succeed*—but in times of stress or extreme sleep deprivation they bubble up anyway: the training camp on the mountain, his first scar, the weird silent week after he was given his staff when no one inside the castle or out would look him in the eye, the flyer derby team's abject anger and betrayal.It doesn't matter; he can always stuff them back in the box where they belong and bam, mask back on, ready for the next mission.

But tonight every box is tumbling open at once and the lids

are crushing him and he's drowning in their contents, every slight, every snipe, every injury he tried to write off as just negligence or his own uselessness—he barely makes it to the tree line before doubling over in the dirt, gasping for breath, but he can't stay here, not when he knows, his uncle *knows*—

He clambers back to his feet and lunges through the night woods. His sides are nothing but stitches. It's cold, a fact that scrapes across his face and then vanishes. He'd rather freeze to death than have that cloak touch him, in his uncle's colors, with his uncle's sigil, a sigil he'd been so proud of getting back, a pitiful puppy nipping at a monster's heels just because it had been known to drop a treat, and he'd been so stupid, he's so *stupid*—

It takes him long moments, punctuated with his own uneven footsteps, to pick out the tweeting from the general rush of blood in his ears. He turns to Flapjack, just visible in the thin moonlight, but all he can see is the clay bird in his uncle's gauntleted hand, crushed to dust.

Flapjack flits around his head, a red ghost, tugging on his hair, but somewhere beyond him, there's a rustle of boots in the trees. Hunter goes still, stops breathing. It isn't hard.

Flapjack tugs harder, but he can't—doesn't the bird know the danger? He can't risk being spotted, not by anyone. His uncle—Belos, *Philip,* whoever he really is—he'll find him the second he pokes his head out. And then—

Dust, floating between his golden fingers.

Flapjack finally gives up, and Hunter shrinks back as a trio of cloaked figures passes not three yards away. *Already* there are scouts out here—of course, the wild witch's house was the worst place for the worst day of his life to spit him back into the present. He can't stay here. He can't go home. "Home" has never been real in the first place.

His air-starved brain throws out a ridiculous flicker: the purple interior of Darius's downtown apartment, spotted once when he'd needed to report in on what was technically the prickly coven head's day off. Clearly he's losing his mind. Any kindness Darius had shown him was just another trick, Belos's newest tactic to keep him in line. He cared more about that cloak than he did about Hunter, and the cloak was in a ripped and discarded bundle on the wild witch's floor.

The three cloaked scouts turn back, a faint search light flashing. He doesn't need a place to go, definitely not the delusional fantasy of one. He just needs to pick a direction and run.

He's always had more stamina than the other coven scouts, who have joked unkindly about his "stone lungs" for years. Tonight, sprinting beyond the bounds of anything his training had ever done to him, he swears he can hear them creak with every heaving breath.

———

The kid is feet away, *inches,* and still Darius can't bring himself to stretch out his hand.

It wouldn't even be his fingers touching the boy—just a few abomination tendrils, just enough to hold him in place, to tell him they're not going to hurt him, they're going to take him somewhere safe—*and he can't do it*. Raine's going to laugh their bow calluses off at him, one day. And he'll shoot back with a *very* pointed question about why the antidote had to be in a bouquet, but that's assuming there is a "one day", that they'll ever be safe enough to take that pause—

"Lost him," Raine mutters. They drop their hood and turn to him, eyes too piercing, too *knowing,* in the gloom. "Not that he'd be happy if we found him. Where else would he go?"

The silence is old enough to drive when Darius realizes it's meant for him. "What?"

"The Golden Guard." Raine adjusts their glasses, catching a flash of moonlight like a cursed dagger. "Where else would he go?"

“How should I know?” The words do not cross Darius’s mind before flying from his mouth, and only Eber’s growl—sharp but mocking—lets him know just how out of line he is. “I’m not his keeper. And it’s not like he’s got any *friends* to hide out with.”

But that’s not quite true, Darius realizes, when the defensive fog clears enough for him to think. It would have been, up until the night that he threw his inherited breastplate and the flimsy skeleton within between Darius and his newfound—sports team? Ridiculous. Sure, he’d vilely betrayed them all, but they already seemed to be past that, if their Penstagram feeds were anything to go by.

“He wouldn’t want to endanger them, not directly,” Darius muttered, realizing too late that he’s speaking allowed. Nothing for it but to commit. “Follow me. I *might* have an idea.”

———

Hunter knows Bonesborough like the back of his glove, but tonight every shadow is new and full of teeth. He’s worn through, barely able to walk straight, when he finally spies Hexside’s watching belfry, and prays to the Titan that it doesn’t glimpse him back.

If this were the castle, he’d have already set off four alarms, triggered two reservist scout squads, and been teleported to one of the interrogation cells at spear-point. The silence around the towering building is eerie, and he doesn’t trust it for a second, but his swaying steps bring him closer to the walls regardless. He can’t just go in the front door; that would be insane, visible to anyone down the boulevard. The fact that he doesn’t… really…know any other entrances doesn’t matter. He’s a trained infiltrator. He won’t be bested by a *school.*

That certainty echoes in his head, mocking him, as he spends the next ten minutes wrestling with the latch of a basement window, unable to quite wiggle his fingers through the gap or muster the strength to just break the thing. He’s going to die. Oh, Titan, he’s going to die out here, curled up and pathetic, failing one last time, and he almost wishes the coven scouts would just show up and drag him back to Belos now. It won’t be quick or painless, but it *will* be private, and no one will see him like this—not the human, not the flyer derby team, not Darius, who only *just* started looking at him like he might be worthy of respect—

And then with a faint greasy squelch, his finger slips—and just catches the inside of the latch. The window drops open and Hunter scrambles through, cursing his own stupidity, that he could fail at something so simple for so long.

———

Darius releases the minute tendril, letting it dissipate back into the grass ringing the school. Despite having been absolutely correct, something that should have fueled him the rest of the night, he’s…drained. Hollow.

Is he *scared?* Is that what this is? Scared of *what?* Belos, obviously, that’s just rational, but Eber’s been patrolling the perimeter via every sabersquirrel and eyebat in a four-mile radius. If there was any chance of Belos showing up, they wouldn’t be here. So why can’t he do more than unlock a window?

It’s not like the kid would *actually* be safe at his place—Darius is pretty sure he’s disabled all the important watching eyes, but he absolutely can’t risk it. Not with his own cover so precarious, and the Day of Unity so close…

But the real reason settles on his shoulder, simmering for the long walk back to somewhere the three of them can be seen. Raine and Eber both glance back at him often, and he doesn’t even have the wherewithal to snap at them to keep their eyes on the road. It’s because the kid—

Hunter.

The human shouted it after him, but Darius has always known it. They looked too similar for it to be a coincidence. Of course he’s Hunter, too.

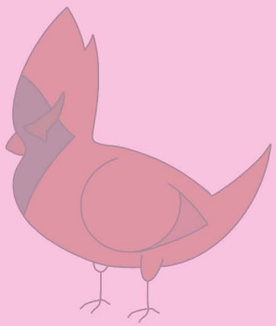
And Hunter will have so many questions. What had they been

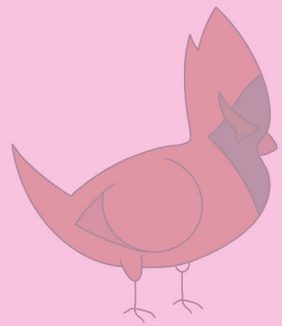
trying to do? What was Belos planning?

And knowing all that, why hadn't they saved him sooner?

Hunter deserves those answers. Darius hates it, hates how unshakeable that conviction is. He can't decided whether it would be lucky or unlucky to live to give them to him.

One way or another, it's going to be one hell of a reunion.





I'm Just a Scroll Call Away

Tinglecannon

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It had been three days since Coven Head Graye was defeated by Gus' superior illusion magic.

Three days since Hunter was surrounded by the frightened faces of Hexside students and teachers alike while he told them the gruesome truth of The Day of Unity.

Three days since Gus's father kindly allowed Hunter to stay in their home until the fateful day, providing him with clean clothes and food.

His scroll lit up and started to vibrate.

The name "Darius" popped up on the screen above the number. His was one of the only numbers Hunter had saved in his contacts list.

Hunter yelped, vibrating scroll jumping between his hands as he struggled to keep a grip on the device. In the movement he must've hit a button because all of a sudden a familiar voice sounded out:

"Little Prince?"

Hunter froze in place.

His eyes flicked over to Gus and Willow, who were lying across the bed and seated on the floor next to it respectively. Gus's mouth was still open, the words he was speaking just a moment ago dying the second the speaker on Hunter's scroll sounded out.

As the seconds ticked by, Darius must've become annoyed, because a slightly clipped tone asked, *"Are you there?"*

In an instant Flapjack, who had been sitting on Hunter's lap a moment ago, jumped onto his head and tugged on his hair, pulling a grunted *"ow!"* out of him.

"Hel*lo!"* Hunter's voice cracked. Gus and Willow flinched in sympathy.

A scoff. It sounded vaguely amused. *"Hello, Hunter."*

A million questions passed through his mind. Why are you calling? Are you evil? Are you going to turn me over to Belos? Did you know the truth about the Day of Unity? Did you know about the other golden guards? Can I trust you? Why weren't you ever nice to me before the end of the world was nigh?

He voiced none of them. Instead, Darius spoke again.

"...are you alright?"

Gus and Willow immediately shot Hunter confused looks. Oh, right, he never did explain the flyer derby incident.

"Y-yeah, I'm ok…" Hunter trailed off. What else is he supposed to say? He wondered if Darius knew about the Hexside fight with Graye.

He swore he heard Darius sigh.

"Good. I'm…happy to hear that."

"You are?" Hunter blurted out at the same time Gus and Willow whispered to each other, "he is?"

"Mmm, I'm quite impressed hearing how you and your friends bested Graye. Good job."

Hunter felt his cheeks redden and struggled not to preen too much over the praise in front of his friends. They looked suspicious enough of the situation as it was. "Thanks."

The conversation lulled. The millions of worries kept repeating through Hunter's head on loop. Can scrolls track your location? Was this all a ruse to catch him off guard? Would the coven guards trash Gus's house when they charged in to capture him?

Darius cleared his throat. *"Right, well. I'm sure you're wondering why I called."*

Here it was. The betrayal.

Hunter could only stare sadly at his scroll and counted the call length time as it went up with each second.

"I had a favor to ask of you. An… important mission."

Hunter's brows knitted together. "A mission?"

"Mhm, something I can only trust you to do. Eda's human student —"

"Luz?!" all three teens shouted in unison.

Darius grunted, then sighed. *"Yes, Luz, and please can you all not yell at the receiver?"*

Hunter panicked. "O-oh, that —"

"Was your little flyer derby friends, yes, I know. Bump told me you were staying with the Porters."

Darius contacted Principal Bump? Trying to figure out where he was? The question 'why' sat heavily on the tip of his tongue.

"Well, since he already knows," Willow playfully shrugged, before leaning closer to the scroll in Hunter's hands with a sweet smile on her face. "Hi, head witch, I'm looking forward to a rematch sometime."

"Yeah, you got lucky last time!" Gus exclaimed from her other side. "We beat one of you, and we'll do it again!"

"Guys —" Hunter's blood ran cold. They still weren't sure where Darius' allegiances lied, what if this was all a trap? Baiting arguably the most powerful Coven Head – far more powerful than Graye could ever hope to be – was a dangerous game.

A chuckle sounded from his scroll.

"I'd like to see you try. But perhaps a different time, after we stop the Day of Unity. Now, back to the matter at hand —"

"You're not with Belos?" Hunter asked before he could stop himself.

"No," Darius immediately replied, *"and I assumed that was obvious by now, since I'm calling you about Luz."*

Something about that answer stung deep in Hunter's chest. Was Darius always against Belos? That meant he was a traitor all of

these years. But…it also meant that Darius never trusted Hunter either.

Is that why their relationship was so contentious for so long?

If Darius tried to tell Hunter the truth years ago, would he have believed him?

No, Hunter could admit that much. Short of seeing Belos' mindscape for himself he would've never been shaken from his beliefs. He would've turned Darius and anyone else in for treason without a second thought even as recently as a week ago.

That didn't make the truth hurt less, though. That Darius knew Belos was corrupt, untrustworthy, and villainous. And that he was unkind to Hunter by proxy for it.

Hunter chewed on his bottom lip before finally, and quietly, asking, “...what about before?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, long enough Hunter would've thought the call got disconnected if not for the timer continuing to tick the seconds away.

Eventually Darius sighed. It wasn't one of his infamous exasperated or annoyed sighs. It sounded…a bit sad.

“I know we have a lot to talk about when this is all over. I promise I'm not making excuses out of it, but we don't have much time before the Day of Unity.”

Darius trailed off for a moment, and Hunter waited for him to finish collecting his thoughts. *“You're the only one I can trust to keep Luz and King safe, so that the rest of us can prevent the spell from working at the source.”*

While Hunter was still hurt over all the ways his life has been flipped upside down these past few days, hearing that Darius had such faith in him made something warm nestle in the center of his ribcage.

Hunter couldn't allow Luz to get hurt, either, the stubborn girl she was.

Hunter glanced over at Gus and Willow. They both nodded at him. He looked up at Flapjack still perched in his hair, and smiled when the palisman chirped in approval.

Hunter exhaled a shaky breath and smiled to himself. He could do this, he could prove his worth.

“I won't let you down, Darius.”

Our Lives on Hold

justmagicalgirl

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“We have to go!”

The words felt foreign in his mouth, as though they were somebody else’s. Hunter had suffered enough concussions over the years to know this was probably the result of one. There was no time for yet another crisis, nor was this the place for one.

He grabbed Flapjack and set off for the platform. The emptiness in his head was familiar. All he cared about was the task he was assigned, as if there was nothing else in the world.

It struck him by surprise as another Abomaton tried to fire his way, only for him to dodge and for the ball of abomination goo to fly past him. How did something like that manage to catch him unguarded?

Without a word, he looked back for the quickest of moments, only to make sure the rest of his brigade —his *friends* — were safe. They were.

Once he was sure, his eyes fixated back on scanning the air in front of him, as well as the land beneath him.

It would be only a few more minutes of flight before they landed, so he began searching the ground for a place to land.

The air brushed every inch of his being, and he noticed a wave of coldness washing over him, as if he were struck by a wall of snow. Hunter didn't recall the air in the area being so cool, especially not by the very end of the season.

Something was wrong. Something felt wrong, and he couldn't quite pinpoint what it was.

Looking back was no help, as he only confirmed his friends were in good condition.

Staring ahead, the spell was starting. Streams of bright golden light began slithering towards the very skull of the Titan.

Someone behind him pointed it out. Hunter wasn't sure who it was.

"Hunter, your arm!" Gus yelled.

Breaking out of thought, he looked down. It hit him all at once.

He had a coven sigil too.

With the realization came awareness of the escalating sting in his arm. In an attempt to manage the pain better, it evolved into a clenched jaw, just like he had done so many times before.

Suddenly, the pain and light around stopped, replaced by ominous clouds of grey. Just as quickly as they left, they came rolling in again. Now, his arm felt like it was on fire but it was beginning to spread and-

They had arrived.

One, two, deep breaths, and a furtherly clenched jaw was enough to keep him moving, to know that finding Luz was the priority and get it done quickly.

“I’ll go down first! Willow, follow me, and Gus, make sure King lands safely!”

If the panorama as seen from above was worrying, with every moment of closeness to the ground it became worse and worse. Witches and demons alike dropped to the ground as the streams of magic turned to flowing rivers, each sporting the same horrific webbed patterns. The closer they were to the stage where the Coven Heads were, the quicker Hunter felt that icy hot stinging turn to burning, to every single fiber of his body begging him to stop, to drop to the ground and bury himself in it

to see if it would ease it in the slightest.

He made a dive for the ground, landing face towards the crowd, and only allowed himself to shut his eyes for the briefest of moments when his feet touched the ground.

In that pithy instant of darkness, his mind allowed itself to waver, to feel and agonize over it. He allowed himself to long for comfort and relief, to want them and miss them before coming back to reality and clenching his jaw for the thousandth time.

Any trace of relaxation left his system, so quickly it numbed him with horror. Hunter knew it was to be expected, a logical part of the plan, but there was something wrong, and if the plan had gone wrong-

“Darius? Darius?”

He didn’t respond. Was it because of how in the open they were? Hunter didn’t think anybody would be able to report him back to Belos even if they wanted to. Not in that condition. Everybody was on the ground, Darius was knocked out and he wasn’t responding, but surely he had planned something to help in case the Owl Lady was caught, right? Surely he had been cautious, and he had to keep acting so everything wouldn't fall apart. Hunter was probably dooming the Isles with that moment, but he couldn't bring himself to leaving just like that.

“Darius, wake up!”

He was probably ruining whatever backup plan Darius had come up with, but something about his acting did not feel intentional to Hunter at all. That was the mark of a great actor, but Darius wasn’t responding and he wasn’t waking up and every witch and demon with a coven sigil was on the ground knocked out or close to be and Darius was not waking up-

In a desperate attempt, Hunter tried shaking him. Surely he would make his abomination hair subtly push him away so the illusion to the other Coven Heads wouldn’t be broken, right? Maybe side-eye him to leave? As dangerous and selfish as it was, Hunter wouldn’t say no to him breaking character, doing anything to prove he was only acting for the sake of a backup plan he was not told about. It was stupid and risked the entire rebellion, especially so close to Belos, but then Hunter would know he was okay. As much as he had been terrified for months on end of it, Hunter would give anything for Darius to wake up and shoo him away, tell him what he was doing was stupid and reckless. If he said he didn’t want to give Hunter sewing lessons anymore, if he said he didn’t want to see Hunter anymore after such a ridiculous stunt, Titan, even if he raged and slashed Hunter to pieces with his abomination form, at least Hunter would die knowing Darius was alive and well.

By the looks of it, Hunter was going to die anyway. He had narrowly escaped death, only to encounter it again. A tiny portion of his brain wondered if this was his punishment for betraying Belos. He lived, only to see the one who cared for him, who offered him more than he would ever be able to repay, die before his eyes. Die right before he did as the draining spell advanced and crept across every single one of his limbs, making them ache as if burning. And still, Hunter knew it would never hurt more than the realization Darius’ abomination hair had turned static as energy kept flowing out of him.

He couldn’t even allow himself to lie there and hope for peaceful last moments. Hunter never prayed as much as Belos would have liked, but if the excruciating feeling would spare his thoughts for long enough, he would have prayed for such. Instead, he had to get up. Get up, find Luz and keep praying to the Titan on anything he had ever held dear that Darius would wake up some day.

In the meanwhile, he just had to keep going.

CONSUMO

HUNTER WAIT-
DO YOU HAVE SOMEWHERE TO LIVE?
CAMILLA'S ALREADY BEEN KIND ENOUGH TO LET ME STAY WITH HER FOR SO LONG...
I COULD LIVE IN HEXSIDE AGAIN... BUT IF GUS AND WILLOW FOUND OUT THEY MIGHT BE UPSET IF THEY FIND OUT
NO
THEN WHY DON'T YOU COME LIVE WITH ME AND EBER?
WHAT
WHY NOT?
WELL FOR ONE I'M THE GOLDEN GUARD, OR AT LEAST I WAS. HAVING ME STAY IN YOUR
I ENTER ROOMS TOO QUIETLY ALSO I'VE BEEN TOLD I SMELL
I'VE ALSO GOT SO MANY ISSUE
I'VE GOT NIGHTMARES AND TI
BLY BE WORSE AFTER WHAT HA
DE AND IVE GOT A LOT OF ISSUE
CONVERSATION WHICH WOULD
TO ME SO YOU PROBABLY HAVE A LOT OF LEFTOVER GUILT FROM THAT. NOT TO
YOU NEED SOMEWHERE TO LIVE, HUNTER. I'M OFFERING MY HOME. YOU DON'T HAVE TO ACCEPT MY OFFER IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BUT I WANT YOU TO COME LIVE WITH ME AND EBER
DO YOU WANT TO?
YES PLEASE-
Aww!
THANK YOU

A PLACE TO BELONG

justsummr

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It took Hunter two weeks to decide where he wanted to live.

In those two weeks, he stayed with Camila. Spending most of his time in thought and recovery while he rotted in her basement. He didn't do much besides lie awake and do his best to eat the food Camila begged him too. His friends were with their families, of course. Luz couldn't tear herself from Eda and King, but she found time to come and sit with him. A few hours at a time in the basement. Hunter had the couch now, but he preferred the mattress on the floor. Luz would squish herself on and sit with him in silence. They hardly spoke.

The possession left growing pain along with new scars. The worst of the pain was the first week. It was a kind of soreness that made it impossible to move. Crying out when he did something as simple as changing his clothes. Itchiness that covered his scars to the point he had to shove socks in his mouth to keep himself from gnawing on the tender zzz zzz skin.

Throbbing and burning at night after he had used his body throughout the day. Leathery feeling skin that only didn't hurt when Camila rubbed some kind of ointment on it. He was sore, his body ached and creaked with movement.

The pain and discomfort faded, though never went away.

Camila had shaved his hair, when Hunter found the physical strength to get himself to hte bathroom and saw the mirror.

It took those full two weeks for Hunter's head to clear. His

mind was always busy. Thoughts of Flapjack, possession, Belos- always plaguing him. Those were the kind of thoughts he didn't dare entertain for too long. The risk of hurting himself or anyone else in the room was too high of risk. If not, he would sob to the point he'd tore his throat open and taste blood. Most of the time though, the thoughts would render him catatonic. Unmoving, unfeeling, nothing in him but Halloween night.

The only thought that didn't send him spiraling, was where he wanted to live.

He didn't really think about it before. Following Camila around and going back to the human realm. But within days of the dust settling, there was a list of people offering to take him in.

The first and most obvious was Camila, despite the fact he was sitting on her couch when she started the conversation. She told him that no matter how long or short, he could stay there. She had space for him, she cared about him. Hunter didn't know if he could do that to her, give her a third kid to take care of; but it was enough to ease his mind for now.

Eda went to shake his hand with an arm that wasn't there and laughed about it for three minutes before sobering up. Apparently, both of Luz's mothers had a thing for strays. She apologized for them 'not getting along before' and 'his bad memories of the Owl House from that one time he was pulled out of Belos's brain and had a panic attack in her living room'. Despite that, she said he was more than welcome, and Raine was moving in too. Someone Hunter knew, and so that he didn't feel alone in being a newcomer.

The Parks only had to hear a bit about Hunter to offer him a room too. Gilbert made an off hand joke about him and Willow sleeping in the same room that made Willow's face go red.

Perry listened to how Camila described Hunter's protection over Gus. How the little one was never out of Hunter's sight for long. How Hunter checked for every meal and injury so that Gus would be as safe as possible. Even without that, Perry smiled, he would take Hunter in if needed.

And… Darius.

Hunter had looked up to Darius his entire life. Finding his cool, alloff, and comedic personality to be charming. He saw himself growing up to be like that. Darius's assumed hatred for him, though, kept Hunter from ever trying to get too close. Hunter had not known why at the time, but he knew Darius didn't like him. For the same reason the rest of the Covenheads didnt like him. He was annoying, a brat. And Darius was easily annoyed.

Hunter was- fine, with that being how their relationship panned out. The childlike wonder never went away, he still perked up when Darius spoke and took his word to heart; he never sought anything more.

Then Darius taught him how to sew.

It was only a handful of lessons, starting with the disaster of meeting Willow and Gus. Those few weeks were some of the best in Hunter's life. Darius was surprisingly gentle and patient. He laughed at Hunter's jokes and corrected his mistakes with softness. It was Hunter's first glimpse at the world outside of Belos. Even just an hour or so a day, and Hunter was being eased into a person that wasn't the Golden Guard.

Hunter enamoration for the man grew tenfold, he wasn't able to hide it any longer. Darius managed to be everything Hunter wanted himself. Threatening to those who opposed him and kind to those who were close. He was a far calmer and more lenient teacher than Belos ever was. Hunter found himself getting close to giddy when he had a lesson later in the day. It kept him going. A time for quiet and learning while getting to know someone he had wanted to know for years. Darius seemed to like him well enough too, starting to smile at Hunter in the hallway and ask how his missions were.

Before the Day of Unity, Darius even seemed… shockingly worried about Hunter and his well being. Giving him clean clothes

and a job that took him far away from the Titans head. That, with the scroll form before, made Hunter realize he and Darius might have been closer than he thought. Maybe Darius really cared about him.

Hunter didn't have time to think about that though. Outside of a few heartfelt feelings and bittersweet memories, Hunter didnt think of Darius much in the human realm. There was never time for it.

Darius had talked to Hunter for quite some time when they first saw each other again. And not about a single important thing. Hunter spent most of it rambling about wolves, unable to stop himself once they were mentioned. He only got a quick explanation that Darius and Eberwolf were safe before Willow had asked him to meet her dads.

Hunter wasn't expecting to hear from Darius again, not so soon at least. But within the day, he got a message sent through Luz's scroll to check up on him. Hunter had left his own scroll in the castle, a time that felt like years ago. It was nice of Darius to ask how he was, and Hunter thought that would be that.

Then it happened the next day.

And the next.

The messages to Luz were the same:

'Luz, if you could, please pass along this message to your friend Hunter. Thank you.

Little prince, I hope you are having a fine day. I also hope this message does not take up too much of your time and energy. I would like to remind you that I am here for you. If you are looking for a place to stay, or need any resources, I am more than willing to provide. I'd like to catch up soon.'

Hunter typed up a message for Luz the first three times until Alador had thrown together a barely working scroll for Hunter to use himself.

Hunter and Darius talked every day for those first two weeks, something Hunter found comfort in. The more familiar, the better. Hunter had never done well with change. Darius mentioned wanting to meet up, something Hunter wanted to do too. At the very least, to fill in the events of everything that happened. Darius also mentioned that if Hunter needed a place to say, he was more than welcome.

That was what hung up Hunter the most.

Move in with Darius? What did that even mean?

Hunter didn't have much to move, but that also meant he didn't have much to offer. Why would Darius even want him? They were friends, sure, but providing for another person was busy work. And with how Hunter spent most of his time in a state one step away from a vegetable, it would be much harder.

Yet, out of his options. Hunter liked that one the best. He loved Camila, honest, but being in her home only reminded him of losing Flapjack. Of those terrifying months where nothing felt normal and Luz spiraled into a depression of her own. He felt guilty following through with any of the other options, living with people who didn't know him. Darius knew him. Darius knew him and liked him enough to offer Hunter a room.

Two weeks, Hunter spent in and out of thought, his body numb after the dust had settled.

Two weeks, and Hunter made his decision.

It was rare for him to leave the basement. The sunlight felt blinding and burning on him from how little he had seen it. Camila had managed to drag him up for a handful of meals, the rest spoon fed to him while he rotted.

Camila perked up, at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Her confusion turned to concern when she saw Hunter's face. "Carino? Are you alright?" She met him half way through the kitchen, her hands up and her brows furrowed. She looked more tired recently. Everyone did.

"Can we talk?" Hunter couldn't recall the last time his throat didn't hurt, the last time it did not scratch or break while he spoke.

Camila nodded, herding him to a chair at the dinner table and

sitting next to him. Hunter closed his eyes, digging his nails into his knees. She dropped everything for him, and he was leaving. “I don't want you to think I'm not grateful,” he began in a whisper.

“Believe me, I don't.” Camila sounded exasperated.

Hunter kept his head hung, unable to look at her. The pinching pain in his legs was the only thing keeping him grounded. “I’m sorry,” he said despite knowing Camila always got sad when he did. “It's been a really long few weeks and- i've had a lot of time to think about everything.”

Camila hummed, ever patient with him.

“You took me in and-and you didn't have to. I will always be appreciative of you and the things you have done for me. I will never be able to make it up to you and-”

“Hey,” Camila shushed, “I know. It's okay, you don't have to thank me.” Hunter didn't know how to explain to her that he absolutely did have to thank her. He could make the next years of his life dedicated to thanking her. Though she did have a point, Hunter needed to spit it out.

“You have offered me more than enough,” he opened his eyes and eased the grip on his legs. “I’ve been thinking about where I want to live, long term…” Hunter took a chance to glance up at Camila's reaction. She was resting her side against hte table, looking at him with intent and kindness. Not a hint of insult in her face.

“Do you remember Darius?”

Camila's lips twitched upwards, “I remember you talking about him, yes. We’ve only met a few times though.”

“He-” Hunter chose to fidget with his own fingers, twisting a pull instead of piercing his skin. “He offered to take me in. For- as long as I want. And I think- I think that might be nice?” If Hunter had any more energy in him, any more life, it wouldn't be a question. He learned the hard way that he had to make his own decisions. He didn't have to get anyone to approve of his choices before he made them.

In the moment though, her permission seemed vital. If she said no, it would be out of the question.

Camila nodded, like he hadn't said anything life changing, still listening like normal. “Is that what you want?”

Hunter blanked, he was looking for her permission, what she thought was best. “I-” his mouth was dry, smacking as he spoke. “I think so.”

She smiled, warm and soft. She sat up, placing her hands on her knees, palm up. “Hunter, all I want is for you to be safe and happy, do you think Darius can give you that?”

Hunter didn't know. He didn't know how he and Darius worked well enough to know what Darius would do at all. It was so messy, confusing. Darius could end up being a lot of things. Hunter couldn't insure anything. “If he doesnt… Can I come back?” He looked down at her open hands, her silent offer to comfort him. He hadn't made up his mind about that either.

“Whenever you’d like.”

That was all he needed.

Hunter told all of friends about his decision before he told Darius. Asking for their opinions and advice before he contacted Darius himself. Most of them, unfortunately, didn't know Darius well enough to have an opinion at all. Hunter probably didn't know Darius well enough to have one himself.

Luz commented on his constant concern over Hunter and his safety. Gus mentioned how Hunter lit up when he talked about Darius and everything the man knew. Willow said Darius was the first person to offer up Hunter a connection to the world outside of the castle. Amity shrugged and said Darius had one of the only not destroyed houses on the isles currently.

Hunter thought long and hard about most of the decisions he made in his life. This one though, wasn't half as thought out. Hunter wouldn't call it spontaneous, it was just- quick. With some help, he managed to call Darius on his scroll. His voice is weak

and cracking from underuse.

“I’m sorry if this is random. And you can change your mind.”

“What is it, little prince?”

“Is the offer still available? To-to move in with you?”

Darius was quiet for long enough that Hunter had formed an apology and excuse to hang up. Right as he started to back track, Darius cut him off. “Of course it is. I-I’ll have to get a room ready for you but- yes. Of course.”

Hunter didn't have much. Everything he owned fit into a bag that wasn't his. Some sewing supplies, a few shirts he made, a jacket, Camila's yellow sweater, and a copy of the first two books of Cosmic frontier. Packing it though, was the most Hunter had moved in one sitting for days. He thought about everything he had left behind at the castle, both anger and sadness filling him as he thought about how it would really only take one more bag to fit all of that too.

Hunter went alone, at his own request. He left on a Saturday, when the weather wasn’t too cold and Camila had the day off incase he panicked and ran. Darius’s house, was very Darius. Hunter could tell he had the right place without double checking the address. It was significantly bigger than any house Hunter had been too. Though HUnter one wit was just Darius living there with the occinall visit from Eber. Hunter swallowed, hoping that it wasn't too empty. He didn't want it to feel like the castle, he liked how full Camilas home was, he liked the warmth.

Hunter wasn’t sure what to expect. The house was dark, but not uninvited. The door was white and a bench was on the porch. The front garden was full, flowers grew in the red grass.

Hunter was too nervous to knock on the door. His arms trembled at his sides and his throat was drying up, the only thing he could do was hit his elbow against the doorbell. Hunter stepped back, he held one of the straps of his bag in a weak grip. His hands are not strong enough to curl into a fist.

It didn’t take long for Darius to open the door, as if he was waiting for Hunter. He looked a little different. More cozy, and more tired. He had eye bags similar to Hunter's own, his wrinkles were more prominent, like he had aged five years in the past few months. He had purple braids that fell just past his collarbone, ones Hunter had never seen before.

Hunter straightens his back, “Hi.”

Darius blinked once, then twice. “Is this all you have?” Darius gestured to the bag with his brow furrowed.

Hunter frowned, not understanding why that particularly hurt him. Yes, it was all he had. That was just a fact.

“Sorry,” Darius huffed, “Bad start, hi little prince.”

It was strange, hearing Darius’s voice again. He spoke heavy yet gentle, like the rumble of a distant storm. The comment didn’t exactly *hurt* Hunter's feelings, it was more a quick sting, and something he recovered from quickly. “Hi,” Hunter said again.

Darius stepped aside, “Come in, I’ll give you the tour.”

Hunter held his breath, stepping in and not letting it go until he crossed the threshold. The house opened to a walkway that led to a distant kitchen and living room. The whole place was decorated in a deep kind of warmth. Dark and detailed decor with splashes of color. It had the elegance and lavishness of the castle but that was where the similarities ended. The castle was empty, cold. Each corner had a pattern or decoration to fill in the space. A warm flowery scent wafted in the air. Open windows and candles made it bright, taking away any cold that would have settled from outside.

“It’s nice,” Hunter said immediately. He was comforted by how similar it was to Camila’s home, despite the fact it was much darker and fancier.

“Thank you,” Darius closed the door and stepped ahead of Hunter. “Now, I inherited this house from my parents. It’s always been too big for my needs, so you have some options when it comes to picking a room. Would you like to do that now? Or tour first?”

Out of all the things, Hunter was not expecting an option. He

was never good at making decisions. He never had to. What he ate, wore, said, thought, was all predetermined for him. The choices he did make were tests, lightly veiled threats. Hunter short lifted, not sure which answer Darius would want.

Darius seemed to sense Hunter's uncomfort, and backtracked. He let out a kind of awkward laugh, “My apologies, I know this is all new. Let me show you around.” Hunter eased at that, he hadn't noticed how stiff his shoulders were.

The ground level of the house was a kitchen, living room, dining room, Darius’s study, and apparently one of many bathrooms. The basement was a work in progress. Mostly junk and a space Darius said he hasn't yet chosen what to do with. He said he could make it a large bedroom, if Hunter wanted. Hunter shook his head, that was far too much work for someone who was already taking him in.

The upstairs was where most of the bedrooms, and Hunter's options were. Darius had the master bedroom, a huge space covered in so much purple it made Hunter's eyes hurt. There was a bathroom, adn something called a ‘walk in closet’ that was roughly the size of Hunter's room in the castle. There were three more bedrooms upstairs. One was already a designated guest room for Eberwolf. Hunter could tell from the makeshift nest in the corner of the room, the mud and sticks covered the rest of it.

The other two, were the ones that were officially available for Hunter to choose from. The first room was only a bit smaller than Darius’s bedroom. It too, had a ‘walk in closet’. It wasn't half as decorated as the rest of the house, though none of the warmth was gone. It was fully furnished, a bed, dresser, nightstand, and rug on the floor. Hunter didn't mind the idea of a big room, the Noceda basement was huge.

The other spare room was significantly smaller. It was still bigger than his room at the castle, but it had to be the smallest room in the house. It was a perfectly normal sized closet, it was furnished the same as the other room, though the bed was a size smaller.

“You’re under no pressure to pick right away. Whatever you choose we can make a trip to get it more properly decorated. I don’t know what you like, so I picked out some basic things for you. Nothing you can't get rid of if you hate.” It was a joke, paired with a teasing small smile.

Hunter smiled back, but he had to admit, he was somewhat overwhelmed.

The bigger room was closer to Darius’s room. There was no reason, but the thought of that made Hunter anxious. It wasn't fair, he hadn't even given Darius the chance to rebuild their relationship. The other problem though, was Hunter was- embarrassingly intimidated by such a large space.

What was he supposed to do with that big of a room? A walk in the closet? Even though the smaller room was still considerably bigger than what he was used to, it was better. It didn't feel so threatening. Hunter liked the small space. He looked down and fiddled with his hands.

“Is- is it okay if- That one?” He pointed down the hall to the smaller room.

Darius’s face faltered for a half a moment before he put his soft smile back on. “Of course it is, let me get some of the things I got you. Go settle.”

Settling wasnt hard when he could carry everything he owned in one hand. He set the bag down on the dress and went to test out the bed. It was soft, too much so. The ground was closer to what he was used to. In the basement, Camila only had a foam mattress to keep him off the floor. Hunter oculdnt spend too much time deciding how he felt about hte bed when Darius came in.

“I know it's not much, but again, I didn't want to over step.”

Darius’s version of ‘not much’ was very different to Hunters. The bed already had sheets, but Darius had gotten another very fuzzy blanket to throw on it. He pulled out clear organizers that were apparently used in drawers. Darius mentioned getting him a

desk too, which Hunter had no idea what to do with. That was nice. All of this was too nice. Darius got a lamp for the bedside table and a mirror to put on the wall. Hunter did not mention that he was currently refusing to look at his own reflection.

The last two things Darius pulled out were a night light and a stuffed wolf.

“I don’t know how you feel about the dark, you don't need to use it. But, until you get used to the layout of the house, some light might be nice.”

Hunter stared at it, he never thought about a night light before. “Thank you,” he looked up just in time for Darius to pull out hte wolf. Hunter's heart jumped up into his throat. It wasn't like him too much to move without asking, so he shocked himself when he ripped it out of Darius’s hand. He looked down at the little thing. It was weighted, a gray wolf with blue eyes.

Hunter hadn’t had it in himself to cry since Willow linked his pinky a lifetime ago.

His eyes filled with tears, he stroked the wolf's head, staring directly at it.

“Are you okay?” Darius’s voice was soft, sounding genuinely worried he had done something wrong.

Hunter nodded, he sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. He couldn't speak, he was sure he would burst into tears if he did. The small weight, the size, the soft fur, it reminded him of Flapjack. It was childish, the way Hunter wrapped both his arms around the toy and squeezed it to his chest.

“Thank you,” Hunter whispered, his eyes closed and still terrified of crying.

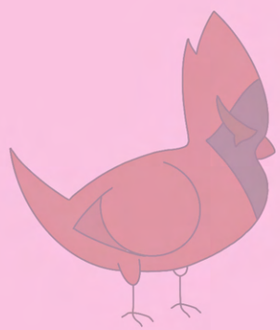
“Little prince,” Darisu began. He sat down next to Hunter on the bed, just out of reach to touch.

Hunter looked up, Darius was fuzzy through the tears. He should be showing more gratitude to try and express how much all of this meant. Darius was smiling at him, a gesture that kept him quiet.

“I am very glad you’re safe,” Darius’s own voice cracked, “And I'm thankful you've chosen to move in. Don’t feel scared to ask if you need anything, I want to make this as easy as possible for you. If you need something, if you want to leave, just let me know. I-” He turned away, Hunter had no idea what to do if Darius was also crying. Darius took a deep breath, and looked back. “There's plenty to talk about, it can wait though. It's been a long day.”

It had only been a few hours, a few hours that felt like weeks out of Hunter's life. He nodded along to Darius’s words, “Thank you,” he said again. It didn't feel like nearly enough.

“Of course,” There wasn't much hair for Darius to ruffle, so he ran his hand across Hunter's scalp. Soft yet firm, enough to shake Hunter's neck. Hunter couldtn help the little laugh that escaped him, wet with tears.



I'll Be Fine, I Promise

themadauthoress13

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This was not ideal. Not ideal in the slightest. Alas, no matter how many attempts Darius made to escape his fate, there was nothing he could do.

He and Eber were to depart on a scavenging trip next week. Meaning that they'd have to leave Hunter by himself for a few days for the first time since they'd taken him in.

Sure, they'd left Hunter alone overnight before, and it typically went well. But five days? That seemed like a recipe for disaster. Hunter was a delicate kid. With everything he'd been through, there was no way that he wasn't. Between the decade-and-a-half hell of being in the coven and under Belos' reign, being possessed, and losing his palisman to his own hand, Hunter had a surplus of both emotional and physical scars.

Hunter had been stable for the first few days after everyone had been freed from the Collector's control. Of course, once the adrenaline rush had finally run out, the boy crashed and crashed hard. It was days upon days of sobbing, nightmares, and near-endless comfort and talking the boy down from breakdown after breakdown. It had begun to improve over time, with the breakdowns becoming more infrequent as Hunter began to adjust to his new life and routine, including therapy at least once a week. But he hadn't done it alone, not without Darius, Eber, and his friends by his side. Could Hunter handle being by by himself while he and Eber were on their mission?

Of course, this was not something for Darius to decide. As such, when Hunter came home from school later that day, Darius resolved to speak with him about the situation. Once Hunter had put his school things away and had begun to wind down, that was when Darius brought the issue up.

"A research trip?"

Darius nodded as he set down Hunter's after-school snack on the table and took a seat in front of him. "Rumors have come to the council as of late, talk of labs and shady operations from the former Emperor's coven buried deep in the woods of the more untamed parts of the Isles."

"Sounds fascinating."

"It could yield a lot of info that could help rebuild the isles."

"Still, the Toes is a bit of a long trip for a quick trip this time of year."

It took a lot for Darius not to wince. This was it. "That's the thing. It…well, it wouldn't exactly be a quick trip." His heart sank a bit when he saw Hunter pause in his reaching for the plate. "The trip would be for about five days, and I'd be back on the morning of the sixth day."

"Oh." That was all Hunter could seem to get out. Darius could see in his eyes that unease was already starting to build. Just as Darius had dreaded.

It was to continue and get it all out in the open. "I've double-checked and both Eber and I will be reachable the whole time. Scroll service is still fully functioning on that part of the isle. We can call every night. I've also talked to a few people, including the Parks, Eda, and Camila, and all are willing to let you stay with them while I'm gone, if you don't feel comfortable staying by yourself."

Hunter remained silent, no doubt drinking in all the

information that was being thrown at him. Darius allowed the silence to linger for a few moments, letting Hunter gather his thoughts. “I know this isn’t ideal in the slightest. If I could back out of this, I would wholeheartedly.” Hopefully conveying the fact that he wanted to take this trip about as much as he’d love to go dumpster diving with Eda in the human realm would be enough to assure Hunter that it wasn’t that Darius wanted to leave him; he just had no other choice.

Finally, Hunter broke his silence. “Do I have to go stay with someone?” It came out hesitant, as if the teen was afraid of what answer he would receive. It was a tone that Darius had come to recognize as Hunter being worried that he was or would be a burden on someone. He’d have to tread lightly when answering.

“Not if you aren’t comfortable with doing so. After all, you are sixteen, and you’re more than able to take care of yourself for a few days. Like we’ve talked about before, there is rarely a time when I’d have you do something that you don’t want to do.” Hunter seemed to relax. Darius took this as a sign to continue. “However, I do have one condition if you choose to stay alone.”

Hunter’s body tensed again as his eyes betrayed his wariness. “What kind of condition?”

“It’s nothing big. I’d just like to have someone come by each day to check in, if you’re comfortable with that. The seasons can be unstable on this part of the isle this year, and in the case of boiling rain in the forecast, it could help minimize the repair bill.” And of course, they’d be there to check on Hunter as well, but Darius felt it would be best to leave that part out. This way, Hunter hopefully wouldn’t feel too guilty if people came by the house, knowing they had another reason for being there.

If Hunter had picked up on his hidden reason for wanting others to come up to the house in his absence, he didn’t show it. All that was visible on the teen’s face was relief. It was almost enough to get Darius’s mind going on what was going through Hunter’s head.

Hunter let out a small sigh of relief. “Oh, that’s fine. Boiling storms are no joke after all,” he weakly chuckled. “I think I’ll just stay by myself then.”

Darius nodded. “If that’s what you want, then it’s fine with me.” He reached over and ruffled the teen’s hair, “Just try not to have too much fun, alright?”

Hunter shot him a wide smile, “I won’t let you down!”

To say Darius was going mad waiting for Eda’s call was a nightmare. Raine, Perry, and the Parks had all been on time when it came to sending their updates after promising to check on Hunter each day. Of course, asking Eda to be on time for something was equivalent to asking for it to snow in a volcano. Though, to Eda’s credit, it was only five minutes past the time she had agreed to call. It was simply his worries taking further control of his thoughts.

The fact was that, while all of the previous check-ins had shown Hunter was supposedly doing alright, the calls the two had at the end of the day had him thinking otherwise. Hunter, as sweet a boy as he was, was a master at hiding his emotions and how he was really doing. An unfortunate skill that he had picked up during his coven years. He could tell from the exhaustion in his eyes and the stuttering of his speech, that sleep hadn’t been coming easy to the boy.

Darius had chosen Eda to check in on Hunter during the last day for a reason. As a foremost authority of hiding things herself, it was his hope that she’d be able to get Hunter to open up, or at the very least, talk Hunter into agreeing to the use of some sort of sleep aid in order to rid the boy of the exhaustion. Before Darius could slip too deep into his worry, his scroll began to ring. He made sure to excuse himself away from the group, moving to a

secluded area before answering the call.

"You're late." The words came out sharper than he intended.

"Lay off, Shrilly Putty. It's not my fault you live so far in the woods that I could buy cookies from elves."

Through some miracle, he managed to stop himself from rolling his eyes. "Excuse me for wanting some privacy. Enough stalling, was Hunter alright?"

"Calm down, Papa Bear. The kid was fine. A bit tired like you mentioned, but he said it was just because he was up late gaming."

"And you believed him?"

"You kidding? I've heard more convincing lies from King when I catch him with his hand in the cookie jar. I told him that too. Got him to admit that he wasn't sleeping too well, so I left him with some mild sleep potions and told him to come by if he wanted."

Alas, that was about what Darius had expected. At least the boy had come clean to Eda. Darius hoped that Hunter would take the potion, but he wasn't holding his breath. The boy was stubborn for sure. "Better than nothing I suppose. Hopefully he'll get some sleep tonight."

"Bold of you to assume that he'll actually take it," she teased.

"Bold of you to assume that he's broken out of the habit of not wanting to disappoint adults," he shot back. Darius let out a sigh, rubbing his temple. "That boy is going to turn me gray, I swear."

"Eh, that's what kids do. Trust me, you'll get used to it. Speaking of which, I've gotta go. I promised King I'd take him to the dump to do some target practice with his screeches and if I keep him waiting, it's the house windows that'll pay."

Ugh. He could count his blessings that Hunter wasn't as rambunctious as the tiny Titan. Taking care of a traumatized teenager presented more than enough challenges. Between King and Eber, his house would have been reduced to cinders and rubble long ago.

"Do what you have to do, just don't let him near the castle ruins, alright? They're still too unstable to be messing around with, let alone blasting with a sonic cannon."

"Whatever you say. Just get home safe tomorrow, alright? The last thing that kid needs is another parental figure just disappearing out of his life." With a click, the scroll fell silent, its blank screen staring back up at him. Unfortunately, Eda's report did little to calm his worries. This was definitely going to be the last of these types of trips that he went on for a while. Maybe next time, he'd bring Hunter along instead of leaving him behind. At least that way, he could keep an eye on him.

For now, though, there was nothing he could do about the matter until he called Hunter tonight. He'd try to talk to the boy about his lack of sleep. Maybe regaling him with some tales from the expedition thus far would be enough to lull Hunter to sleep without the use of any potions. Truthfully, he wasn't too keen on Hunter taking potions without him around to begin with. After all, despite the research they'd done on the effects of different magic on grimwalker biology, there was always the chance that some sort of negative side effects could pop out of nowhere.

"Just one more day," Darius muttered, slipping his scroll back into his pocket before walking back over to the group. "Don't worry Hunter, I'll be back soon."

If speed limits had been a thing in the demon realm as they were in the human realm, then Darius would have been facing felony-level charges for how fast he'd been rushing home after the research team had been dismissed. He didn't want to leave Hunter alone for any longer than he had to. The boy had tried to hide it on their nightly calls, but it was clear to Darius that the distance

was weighing more on him with each passing day. Last night's call was the roughest he'd seen Hunter look in a while. Though they were faint, he had seen traces of the boy's eyebags beginning to return. Clearly, he wasn't sleeping well, though he didn't admit this to Darius. He'd have to have another talk with him about being honest with his feelings.

However, first he'd have to get home. At a record-breaking pace, Darius had managed to make the journey back from the Toes in a few hours. He hadn't even wiped his feet before throwing the door to the house open and calling out. "Hunter! I'm home."

At first, the house was silent. A moment later, the sound of a door closing from upstairs rang out, followed by the tell-tale thumps of feet cascading across the floorboards. Soon enough, Hunter made his way down into the living room to see for himself that his ears weren't deceiving him.

"Darius!" Hunter rushed over to him, all but tackling him with a hug, "Welcome home!"

Darius heaved a sigh of relief upon seeing Hunter was okay. With the hand that wasn't currently pinned to his side by the boy's hug, he reached up, tussling Hunter's hair. "Glad to be home, Little Prince. I hope you didn't get into too much trouble while I was gone." Though his tone was purely teasing, it was still clear from the way that Hunter froze that he knew exactly what Darius was talking about.

"...Was it Raine or Eda?" Hunter peeled his head off Darius's chest, looking up at him sheepishly. Oof, Eda wasn't kidding, Hunter clearly hadn't been getting much sleep. Hopefully, tonight would yield a peaceful night's sleep for the teen.

"Eda. She said you were absorbed in some sort of game for the last few nights?" He wouldn't call the boy out now, not when both of them were so wiped out. He'd let whatever lie Hunter was going to tell go for the night, then talk to him over breakfast in the morning.

"Game?" A flash of confusion crossed Hunter's face before a look of realization replaced it. "Oh, right, the game. Yeah, Luz lent me a few of her old video games from her collection, and time got away from me."

It was a weak lie and they both knew it. Heck, it was clear on Darius's face that he didn't believe the boy. Darius just offered a tired sigh.

"I still don't get how video games are so popular. All those fighting games, farming games, time management games, they're just so dull." He gave Hunter a light pat on the head, "I'm glad you had fun though."

"Sure, I'll take the opinion of what's dull from the man who willingly stood and watched paint dry in the kitchen last week."

The smug look on the boy's face was glorious. It was nice to see him being comfortable enough to talk back.

Darius barked a laugh at the teen's sass. "I suppose I can forgive a few late nights. It is a school break after all. Just don't make a habit of it, alright? The last thing either of us needs is Mrs. Noceda getting on both of us for you not taking care of yourself like last time."

Hunter let out a weak chuckle of his own. "Yeah, the last thing I want this close to flyer derby season is bed rest. I'll ease back on it, I promise."

Darius smiled before reaching out and ruffling the teen's hair. "Good decision. Now if you'll excuse me, I desperately need to shower and get out of these nasty clothes. How does take-out sound for dinner?"

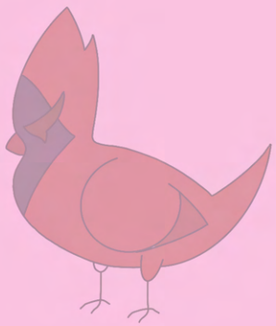
"Sounds good to me."

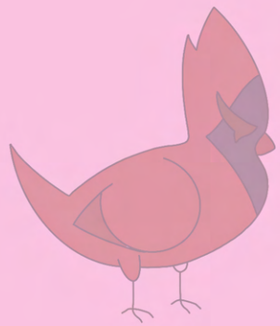
Darius gave a tired nod before turning away. He hadn't even made it to the stairwell before he heard the soft thumps of gentle footsteps. Before he could take another step, two pale arms appeared before wrapping around him from the back. Darius

could feel his heart melt as a small whisper rang out from behind him.

“Please don’t leave again.”

A soft smile made a home on his face as he accepted the boy’s hug. “I’m not going anywhere.”





Don't You Remember

Nessa

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When Darius first sets his eyes on the taciturn boy sitting on a bench all on his own and observing the birds flying around the park as if he were an old man watching life pass him by rather than a kid –he can't be any older than 10–, it feels as if someone just dropped a bucket of cold water on his head.

He shivers. He sees the boy shiver too, before bright brown eyes snap to look in his direction. The sun shines bright and strong. Darius could almost swear that it makes the kid's eyes gleam with tints of pink amongst the clear recognition shining on them.

He was always bad at hiding his emotions.

Then again, Darius has tried his best so he wouldn't ever have a reason to want to anyway.

He thinks he could do the same thing this time.

Though, of course, he's jumping the gun a little bit here, he can admit, letting out a soft chuckle as the kid stares at him as if he's unsure if he wants to run toward him or stay in his seat making the perfect impression of a statue.

Walking toward him and putting his hand over the kid's head feels as natural as breathing, as right as a heartbeat. He can practically feel him relaxing under the palm of his ungloved hand, and it brings a sense of familiarity he hadn't realized he had been missing until now.

The last piece of the little puzzle that makes up his family adjusting into place perfectly.

The grass at the park is green and well taken care of, evidently, with every flower blooming around them in sparkling colors in what Darius cornily thinks must be a fitting display for the most important moment in his life. Or at least a very defining one. He can see why the birds have gathered around, colorful enough that he can even see red and blue ones around, none of them the ones the kid wants to see the most, he gathers, but still reminiscent enough for him to have been so transfixed on them before he came around.

None of that really matters though. Not to him, because the only thing he wants to look at is the face he hasn't realized he had missed for decades.

Time keeps playing them like fools, it seems, because in what should be perfect, unmarred skin, there's still a scar he remembers far more than he would have liked. One he hasn't seen in so long he had practically forgotten the shape of it, though he wouldn't dare affirm now that it looks exactly the same.

But there'll be time to talk about it, like there was so much time ago, when they took the first step to finally become a family.

Besides, it would be crass if the very first words he ever spoke to him were to remind him of something bad. No longer harsh and uncaring like that first time, but unpleasant nonetheless.

There's a vow glimmering in his brain, one that speaks of protection, a refusal to cause further harm.
It's been so long since he's had to remind himself of these things.

"It's good to see you, little prince."

Hunter laughs, his voice in a far higher pitch than he

remembers, and yet the warmth that overtakes his chest is just the same.

"Really? If you're so happy you could have come earlier," His voice is petulant, which sounds fairly ridiculous in such a young child, not to mention Darius can perfectly see the joy in his eyes.

It pleases him that he can still read him so easily.

"Well, I don't know if you noticed, but I had no idea who you were or that you were here until approximately five minutes ago, so that would have been difficult."

"That's cold," The kid accuses him, though there's no real hurt in his voice, and so Darius allows himself to roll his eyes.

"Are you telling me you did remember me?"

"Nope," Hunter looks at him with no discernable expression on his face for a couple seconds before he dissolves into giggles. Darius wonders if it's his age or just the pure unadulterated joy of having found each other again; if it's the latter he wouldn't blame him, he's feeling plenty of that himself after all.

"I'm glad that's sorted out," He huffs, crossing his arms. He doesn't miss how the kid automatically leans toward him at the loss of the touch over his head, and it feels simply right to do the same so they can rest more easily against each other, arm to arm.

He feels like sweeping Hunter into his arms but that feels too presumptuous for a first meeting, even though there's seldom anyone in the world that he knows nearly as well as he knows him to be able to proclaim with certainty he wouldn't be upset about it.

"Where have you really been?" He asks softly. "You are not telling me you have been sleeping on this hard bench all this time, are you?"

Hunter snorts.

"No, I think I would be really mad if you hadn't come for me if that were the case," another smile breaks out on his face, showing the tooth gap on his upper teeth, just as adorable as Darius liked to remind him it was.

"Then…?"

It's not like there's an easy way to ask your kid, who previously had been created by a monster of a man for his own amusement, if he has parents now. Especially when you feel a sting of pain at the thought, despite how much you always long for said kid to be happy, whether that directly involves you or not. It would be weird, that's all, to see Hunter and not think of him as his son. That's something perfectly reasonable to have a hard time coming to terms with, he thinks.

The boy is far too small at the moment, but his eyes already look shrewd when he directs a knowing look in his direction.

"Foster care," He says easily, as if it weren't both the worst and the best case scenario.

"Ah."

Guilt gnaws at Darius for his previous thoughts. Of course he wouldn't wish the pain of losing his parents upon this bright kid who has always made the lives of everyone around him brighter just by being there. Not like anyone asked him, but if they had, he would have said that if they were going to be given a second chance, that should have been the opportunity for all of them to lead happier lives, right?

Then again, it's hard to imagine himself living a happy life without a piece of his family right there in the frame.

He's not one to doubt himself in these matters, or at least he wasn't, but he supposes those kind of senses aren't transferred from one lifetime to the other, because he finds himself wondering if Hunter had wished that everything had gone right with his family this time, so he wouldn't have to be a kid with an uncertain future once more.

A wince settles over his face at the thought that at least there are no scouts chasing him to get him killed at the clutches of the worst person he's had the displeasure to know.

“Don’t make that face,” Hunter frowns, his little hand taking its place over Darius’ to catch his attention as if it belonged there. The man is glad to notice that there are no visible scars over his fingers, at least.

“What face?”

“That one!” The hand that isn’t currently over his own points, a little finger directly in front of Darius’ eyes, as if that would magically create a mirror to make him see what he means.

He supposes that wouldn’t have been such an impossible thing. In another life, that’s it, though that never figured under the extensive list of his kid’s talents.

“You always look like that when you’re feeling guilty,” Hunter continues. “Stop that. I thought you already knew that, you didn’t do anything to hurt me. You said it yourself, you didn’t even remember me.”

Darius sighs. It’s ridiculous that he’s even arguing with a ten year old but there have been weirder things in his life.

“You could at least let me make it up to you somehow, couldn’t you?”

There was a time in which Hunter would have looked at him like he was crazy, because he couldn’t believe that he could deserve anything, let alone an earnest attempt at an apology for what he didn’t perceive as an actual offense.

Right now, he has the impression that he’s more intrigued about what he could possibly mean to do rather than genuinely thinking he’s owed compensation.

“How?”

Darius smiles despite himself, turning his hand over the bench so he can hold the smaller one and squeeze it for a moment.

“I was thinking about adoption.”

It should have been obvious, a part of him believes that it is, but Hunter, despite all the eternal wisdom that might or not have been passed onto him, all the knowledge from a life he shouldn’t remember, is still ten years old, and when he smiles, his mouth opens so much that his cheeks redden with the effort of the gesture, while his eyes are practically sparkling with tears in such a way that he half thinks it wouldn’t matter if it were nightfall, he would be able to see that radiant expression all the same.

And so it’s settled.

It’s with a lot of persuasion and pouting that Hunter resigns himself to go back to the house he’s staying –and Darius thinks it’s rather endearing how much emphasis he makes on the word ‘house’, as if he wanted to signal to him that there is no home for him except for one they can share as a family–, while Darius goes back to his own to start the tedious, but necessary process of researching how these procedures work and how long they take.

He wishes he had remembered if only so he could have saved himself all of the headache.

Not that it matters, of course, no matter how exhaustive the paperwork would have been, there’s nothing in this world or in any other that he wouldn’t do if it meant he can hold his son in his arms again, give him the happy life he has always deserved.

It’s hard not to pretend this isn’t something they have done before, though he has to admit he’d rather favor the way it was done over on the Boiling Isles, if only because it was more straightforward. Perhaps having a land in ruins was partially helpful to adopt a child while skipping all the annoying steps but he’s not about to wish a tragedy upon the Earth just so he can sign a few papers more.

Not too much at least.

It takes longer than he’d like, even taking into consideration Darius seems to fit all the necessary requirements to be considered suitable to foster a child, and that the one in specific he wishes to host seems more than enthusiastic to go with him, but he isn’t overall surprised due to the lack of an obvious connection there.

How do they know each other, is the fact of the matter here.

They spun a tale, before separating, one that had been born half in truth, half in a convenient lie. They knew each other because Darius was a friend of Hunter's dad's cousin. A little convoluted, and only half fake, if one can consider the clone that preceded you the cousin of the original. But it's more than clear that there's a connection there, and Darius prides himself in generally seeming like a trustworthy person, and eventually they get away with it.

He rolls his eyes at his own thoughts. It's not like they're committing a crime. Eber must be rubbing off on him, and oh, he's sure Hunter is going to be delighted to know that he's not making due with only him this time either.

Regardless, the day comes in which he can finally welcome the kid home, where he belongs. Fittingly, he has prepared a room for him already, and it almost feels like yesterday when he had done the same thing, still unsure that the boy would even want to stay but knowing that he had to make the offer and provide him with the best he possibly could.

He had to know he had someone in his corner at all times. This time he's sure that he knows, but he didn't slack on his parental duties in the past and he's not about to start now just because everything is easier in appearance. There are plenty of books and little trinkets that he's more than sure that he kid is going to be regarding with delight later today.

But all the preparation in the world and the previous experience doesn't stop him from being a nervous wreck, earning a couple of huffs from Eberwolf and even the occasional pat on the back as moral support until the bell finally rings and he can receive the last member of their small ragtag family into their home once again.

The same social worker that he's been mostly dealing with is there, a hand hovering over Hunter's back without really touching him, and Darius can feel himself relaxing over that; even if the kid is a touchy one when it comes to his loved ones, it's never any easy to see a stranger putting their hands on him without wanting to jump on his defense on principle alone.

His greeting is half distracted, though as polite as he can make it, and before he knows it, he's kneeling so he can reach Hunter's height properly and look him in the eye.

"Hi, Hunter."

"Hi, Darius."

He wonders if they should be going for formal, but the playfulness in his son's voice can probably be passed off as ease for being around someone familiar. He figures that must earn them some points for credibility.

"You came," Hunter adds, in a slightly more serious tone, and Darius doesn't miss the awe in it. From the corner of his eye he sees that the woman overseeing this process is raising her eyebrows, perhaps wondering when it is that they talked. According to the half truth of their story, they met each other in town and that's how Darius knew that the kid needed someone to take care of him, so he figures that's enough to satisfy her curiosity.

But ultimately it doesn't matter, because this isn't about her. This moment isn't for anyone other than the two of them, for now. Darius chuckles. "You are the one who came here, if we want to be precise about this," He's amused, but there's far too much softness in his face to be hidden. "But you know I'm always going to come for you."

"I know."

There's not a shadow of doubt in that voice and oh, how much Darius has missed this kid. He sort of feels like crying but that would be too much for what supposedly makes up a casual meeting, wouldn't it? Though it's hardly as if he cared about that, which is a good thing because he can tell his eyes are tearful, though not enough not to dedicate more time to refamiliarize himself with every little aspect of his kid's face.

Scarred still, but not as much.

He gets up, and exchanges the necessary formalities with the social worker, grabbing what little there is of luggage while Hunter looks like he's itching to walk to his side already, before they can both finally walk through the doorway and close the door behind them.

Darius takes a deep breath, he can feel, more than see, Hunter at his side taking in air as well, no doubt trying to get himself familiarized with the place he will be calling home from now on, though he doesn't have enough time before someone is ambushing them both and pulling them into a hug with unsurprisingly strong arms for such a small frame.

"Eber?!" Hunter yelps, before letting out a laugh of pure joy. "Eber! Darius, why didn't you tell me?"

Darius pats both of their backs softly and waits patiently until he can feel one last squeeze before they all regain their own balance without holding onto one another; it's not that he wishes to pull away from the hug, but they've got more than enough time for things like this and he would like to at least take a couple of steps more inside, maybe reach the couch, before they have this conversation.

"I figured it would be best to leave it a surprise."

"Did you like it?" Eber signs, and Darius is concerned for all of two seconds before he sees Hunter's face brighten up.

"I loved it!" And he seems to mean it, but when has he not? Darius has never met someone more honest in his life. "We can be a family again!"

"Aren't we already?" Darius asks, entertained, as he puts Hunter's bags aside and waves the two of them toward the living room.

"Not according to the lady, no," Hunter sounds offended enough that he can't help but laugh again.

Eber smiles and it almost looks like they have fangs, though Darius knows that to be untrue. Mostly. He has kept that nasty habit of his of biting anyone they deem annoying enough to do so. That is to say, very little has changed other than the fact they can't jump on his back and crawl up to his shoulder as easily, though that's certainly not for any lack of trying.

"That lady can put her opinions in-"

"Eber!"

"What?"

"He's ten!"

"He's Hunter!"

"Yeah, Darius, come on!"

He wrinkles his nose in distaste. "That doesn't mean you can just start swearing in front of him, it's not even been five minutes," He shakes his head. "I can't believe I forgot how much of a handful the two of you were together."

"You love us," Hunter says, with all the confidence of a lifetime spent with nothing but affection directed his way. Trusting and earnest.

"You do!" Eber accuses, with all the impertinence of someone who has been by his side through hell and high water, no matter where and no matter when.

Darius seriously wants to act infuriated with them, but he knows that he doesn't stand a chance. With a heavy sigh, he sits on one corner of the couch, patting the space by his side with a pointed look.

"Yes, I do, you know that," The other two cheer rather dramatically, turning to each other to slap their hands together in triumph before quickly settling in place, Hunter half on Darius' space rather than abiding by the divisions established by the piece of furniture and Eber just as close at Hunter's other side. "Don't make me regret that."

"You wouldn't do that either."

"Too soft for that!"

Darius groans. "You are both awful."

There's familiarity in the way they curl up around each other, hands finding arms and warmth being shared together as if this

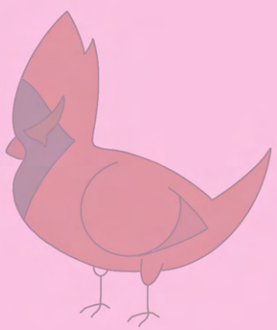
was not the first time in so long, but just one of many, as it used to be. It is one of many, Darius supposes, except they have a whole future to look forward to.

He's almost too happy not to say anything more for now, though if he knows Hunter well enough –and he does–, the curious eyes he's directing toward everything he can even glance at are soon going to be directed toward the two of them, and an avalanche of questions will be coming their way.

That's alright though.

They have time to answer as many as necessary until his curiosity is satiated.

They've got all the time in the world.



Let Me Apologize for the Mistakes I Don't Regret

NeonLite

Trigger Warning: Panic Attack Scene

When Darius began waking up, he was immediately hit with the overwhelming urge to *stop.*

He resisted a groan as a weight settled deep across his body, a heavy chill that pulled and *ached.* He exhaled, his breaths hurting, and that was when Darius felt the movement of something on his arms.

Darius sighed, his head sinking deeper into the pillow. Now that he could focus a little better, he could tell it was too thin to be his blanket and it didn't *feel* like Hunter or Eber were in bed with him. The thing pulsed slowly on both his arms, and one was atop his chest.

Pulsing. And warm.

Darius had never shot up so quickly in his life, letting out a string of curses as he clenched his head, the full weight of a migraine finally slamming into him. He yanked whatever worm or snake or *whatever beast* that were clamping on his arms, the things biting deeper the harder he pulled. Darius could handle some pain and a headache, but he needed this off- he needed to go get Eber before his beasts sucked his blood out or something-

The teeth tightened one final time before finally letting go and it only took three sharp tugs for the one on his chest to release him. He threw the thin tube beasts away, shakingly rubbing his arms,

small beads of red leaking through.

And purple.

(Purple?)

There was purple dripping down his forearms, lightly mingling with the red droplets. Darius brought his left arm closer to his face and tilted it, watching as the purple shone brightly against the red. His eyes wandered to the beasts and saw that they were leaking- bright silver slowly seeping out of their tips, a humming echoing in his ears. Darius looked around a room that wasn't his, looked at the bed that wasn't his own before his eyes landed on the tube beasts again.

Those weren't beasts.

A hospital, his tired mind supplied, working on overdrive as he rubbed his eyes, trying to chase away the fog. He was in a hospital, but how did he get here?

Darius licked his lips, frowning at the dryness. He needed to focus, he needed to think-

Where was Eberwolf?

The thought struck him and stuck, begging him to think of it more. Darius sat up straight and looked around, because the last time he was hospitalized, Eberwolf was in the vents watching him and maybe this time he was captured, *caught* -

Darius growled, throwing the blanket off and shoving himself upright, staggering as he swayed. But he planted his feet and stood, his breaths deep and heaving, but it would be okay, everything would be okay if he could make sure Eberwolf was okay and alive and safe-

He stumbled, knocking over the bedside table, the contents clattering as they fell. Darius lay there on the ground and exhaled, the coolness beckoning him to fall back asleep. But he needed to get up. He needed to make sure Eber was okay. He needed to think- why was he here, *what had he done?*

(He was *tired.)*

Darius' eye fell towards his wrist (*a chain*) but the purple brand he was looking for was gone.

And Darius exhaled as all the tension left his body, the sound of thumping feet echoing on the floor beneath him.

Eberwolf was home, safe with Hunter. Eberwolf was okay, and the reason he wasn't here must be because Hunter isn't and that means they're both okay.

He could feel his body becoming weightless, lifted gently off the floor, muffled shouts echoing in the space around him. Eberwolf was safe and with Hunter.

Everything was… okay.

He blinked his eyes slowly, blond quickly blocking all his sight as he felt tears slowly drop on his shoulder, a gasping shudder made his ears twitch.

"Darius?" and Darius ***focused,*** *Hunter's face blurring in his vision. Darius gently shushed him and tried to hug him close, but his body remained flat on the ground.*

(Why did that make him want to cry?)

"H-Hunter," Darius whispered, his arm moving to cup his child's face and stop his tears. "Everything is going to… be okay."

The world faded back into comfortable black, and Darius allowed it to consume him.

The second time Darius woke up, he was far more cognitive and in far more pain.

He sat up and stared at the empty white walls for a moment, glaring at them, before he remembered where he was.

He sighed as he slumped back in bed because *he was still here.*

Darius looked at his arms- *and dear Titan he had been out of it last time-* and saw tubes pumping silver magic into him, their warmth a steady pace with his heart. Darius watched them for a little while, transfixed as the silver slowly trickled to radiant purple, his fingers tapping against them.

How did he get here?

Because cognitive thinking seemed to be something that made

his headache ebb painfully, Darius decided not to try thinking. Instead, he turned to his side and looked over at the bedside table, stretching and grabbing his scroll. He settled back into bed, propping his pillow to better support his head, before he opened it up.

The wall of messages was intimidating, but it made something in him curl happily. He unlocked his scroll, quickly opening Penstagram to reply to some of the 'get well soon' messages before he saw something that made his blood curl.

A picture of Eberwolf, fangs and flames licking his mouth, a *dragon* above him, one with shiny blue scales and four wings, burning something in front of Eber.

(He swallowed as he scrolled down, ignoring the discourse under it.)

A picture of him, his eyes wide and panicked, rushing towards a flash of yellow and covering it.

(Hunter.)

A picture of a Titan Trapper, standing above his still body, Hunter cradling him, tears in his eyes, *not looking at the Titan Trapper-*

Darius wasn't sure when his scroll clattered to the ground, when he stood up, or when he began tugging his hair.

(Useless. *Uselessuselessuselessuselessuselessuseless-)*

Hunter. Hunter had come when he wasn't supposed to. Titan Trappers, they had all threatened the Isles in search of King when they had finally gotten peace. Raine was the one who gathered all the old Coven Heads, their best bet at winning. They were winning. Hunter and his friends had shown up.

They were winning.

He felt something shake him, and he turned to a witch, one that was quickly blurring as something wet trailed down his cheeks. He felt hands on his chest, his back, something pinching his arms, whispers-

He looked up, blinking as the witch's face scrunched up, their mouth moving faster, before he exhaled.

And melted.

He grabbed his head as he reformed, yelping as he fell onto the ground. He lay there for a moment, panting, before pushing himself up and stumbling to his feet, raising his arm slowly.

(Teleporting to get out of the hospital supplying him with the magic he had apparently lost was a bad idea.

Teleporting again, when the first one clearly weakened him-)

Darius was rubbing his wrist. Darius *couldn't* stop rubbing his wrist. He should, and he could feel where his nails had begun digging into the skin, but- but he couldn't. He needed *Hunter,* he needed to see him, protect him-

("Belos is gone," Eberwolf would whisper to him, when Darius' stupid nightmares woke them both up. *"and we're safe now. Okay?")*

Hunter told Darius that he felt safe with him, and Darius knew how hard that must've been. How hard it was for Hunter to trust he would be okay because of how easily that was ripped away from him in the Human Realm, the place that should've been the safest. How hard it was for Hunter to trust and hope, because hope was weak and fickle and disappointing, but Hunter held hope for him in the months after the Day of Unity, kept holding hope that Darius was someone he would be able to trust. And when Hunter hugged him, his head buried under Darius' chin as he whispered that he trusted Darius *and loved him-* and Darius had still gotten hurt and sent to the hospital when Hunter was *who knows where-*

(He was running. He was slow and he had to keep pausing to gasp for air, but he needed to get home. To Hunter.

Darius might be having a panic attack.

Darius couldn't find it in him to care.)

Darius gritted his teeth as he stumbled again. He needed to take deeper breaths, he needed to breathe- he couldn't be this pathetic, not right now not again, *not again-*

Darius bit his lips, copper filling the space between his teeth as

he focused on taking each slow (too slow) step, his arm wrapped around his chest, the foreign feeling of his braids dusting by the wind.

This was taking too *long.* This was taking too long. There was no guarantee as to how long he's been a useless sitting duck (again), there's no guarantee that hauling himself across the Isles- by foot- will help. There's no guarantee he won't pass out (and be vulnerable) once he arrives at the edge of the Isles, where they were fighting.

There's no guarantee that the battle hadn't *ended* already, because Eberwolf didn't have a dragon with him when Darius was conscious last, and with how protective the laws were about the ownership of dragons, many which Eberwolf helped tighten in his time as Coven Head, there was no way Eberwolf would've whipped out a dragon unless he was willing to deal with the headache of backlash that action would've warranted-

(Eberwolf's beasts were his *friends.* Eberwolf would've never brought a dragon out in front of the Titan Trappers unless he knew it could handle it, because Eberwolf might be a beastkeeper but he-

He wasn't a normal one. Some might even say a *bad* one, because Eberwolf has a wide arsenal of beasts under his disposal, but Eberwolf was always, always careful with them.

That might've been one of the first things that piqued Darius' interests, years and years ago.)

Eberwolf wouldn't bring out a dragon unless he was ready to end the fight. So, the fight must be over- because Eber had looked so angry, and Hunter was there and they had both been so careful to not get too angry around Hunter because Hunter still flinches away- so the fight must be over.

Eberwolf hadn't brought Hunter to the hospital. He might've, or Hunter went on his own, but they weren't there now. Darius didn't know how long he's been there, and he doesn't think he has his scroll, and he thinks he might still be wearing a hospital gown and he *knows,* in a place deep within his soul, that if he stops to summon his scroll or even catch his breath he'll collapse and he can't stop now.

So home. Home seemed like a good place to start. His teleportation hadn't been great but it was good enough (for once), he recognized where he was and he had been moving for a bit and even if it was further than what he felt like he could handle, he could do it. He could get home. He needed to get home and check on Hunter, because that was *his child* that was cradling his body and Darius would always take a shot for Hunter, *always,* but Hunter didn't deserve to be hugging the remains of someone else who sacrificed themselves for his sake.

(He wished he could've seen Hunter smile at Flapjack more. He wished he could see the gentle smile Hunter had whenever his boy talked about the palisman and he wished he could see it when it wasn't tainted with grief.)

A house was in front of him. *His* house was in front of him, and Darius scrambled to move faster, kicking down the gate and jogging towards the entrance, abomination failing to form but he needed a little, something, *anything-*

A knife formed for a few moments, long enough for him to slice the doorknob down as he fell into the house, the door swinging open. He wasn't sure how long he lay there, his vision blurry and head pounding, but it was too long and he would only be able to breathe again when he held Hunter-

(There were *keys* hidden nearby. There were keys nearby that were meant for Hunter but were rarely used, because while Eberwolf did teach Hunter that the best way to sneak out was walking out the front door, the best way to sneak *in* was through a window. He doesn't know how Eber is so easily able to get in through windows, he should be concerned by how easily *Hunter* could do it, but Darius always pretended not to notice and never moved the key.

He could've *used* that.)

Darius used the door to haul himself up, gripping his right arm tightly (nails scratching where the sigil used to be), and stared into the house.

It should not be this messy.

Why was his home this messy?

Because Eberwolf was fine with anything and Hunter didn't care too much about his own appearances, they both knew Darius liked a clean house. Messes were something they both kept to a minimum outside of their own room unless they were messing with him, and he couldn't *hear* anything and the house seemed empty- *and the house was messy.*

An ambush. His child was ambushed- but Eberwolf would never let anyone hurt Hunter because Hunter was *his cub*- but then why was the house a mess, did something happen, were they attacked, did Eberwolf get into bigger trouble than he thought, was Hunter alone right now just like back then, when he thought no one but his uncle cared even when Darius *did* but never admitted it because he's a terrible person and Hunter should have gone with Eda, Camila, *anyone else-*

It was getting harder to ignore that panic attack now.

It was getting harder when all Darius had done was ignore the slow buildup until now, but now his ribs were too tight, his heart was too big, his breaths too shallow and *not enough* but his lungs were already burning, too much-

He failed again. He failed again he failed again he failed again, and the more the thought tumbled around his head the more it hurt, and the more it hurt the harder it was to breathe.

Hunter would have panic attacks sometimes. Always in the late of the night, almost always from a nightmare because Hunter was so brave (even when he shouldn't be) and Hunter could almost always ignores the things that would trigger him until he was in the safety of his room because Hunter still didn't understand how well he was coping with everything that's happened and Darius would always be so proud of Hunter and mad at *himself,* because he was always useless when it mattered and he was doing it, *again* and every single part of him urged him to move forward, urged him to use his magic to be *useful* for once-

(You will not lose him again.

What was the point of all this power, if he couldn't even protect the ones he loves?

*You will **never** lose him again.)*

Darius didn't know how long he'd been spiraling, hunched over in the corner of the living room. He wasn't sure how long he'd keep spiraling for, if he didn't hear pings echoing in the house.

Darius blinked, the sound of his heart pounding in his ears but he listened, and from the kitchen he could hear a scroll. The sounds were soft, quiet, but in the aftermath (and continuation) of his panic attack he grappled with it, his ears perking up and he slowly began the breathing exercises he learned a lifetime ago.

Three things he could see.

The door. His wrist, which still didn't have a sigil. And further ahead, a bundle of purple, laying atop the couch.

Three things he could hear.

The scroll, which was still receiving messages. The wind chimes as it gently whistled against the breeze (Eberwolf brought it home, the glass made in the shape of birds). His breathing, which wasn't overwhelming anymore.

Three things he could feel.

The wooden floor beneath him. His hair, scratching his neck. His gown, soft under his fingertips.

Darius exhaled. And pushed himself up.

He slowly approached the thing on the couch and held it up, giving it a once over before pulling it over his head. The sweater was even softer than the hospital gown and was warmer and had Hunter's signature in the corner and Darius finally felt more of the tension that was crushing his chest loosen because this wasn't in the house last and maybe he could hope too.

(Because hope was weak and fickle and disappointing but if Hunter could do it when it's hurt him so many times, why couldn't he?)

Darius slowly made his way over to the kitchen, his footsteps echoing across the floor. It was much cleaner than the living room was, but this seemed like a more natural messiness from an overslept morning.

Unless it was a trick and a trap and Hunter and maybe Eber needed his help and here he was still trying to pull himself together after a pathetic panic attack-

Eberwolf's scroll was charging. The screen was on, but Darius only glimpsed at it before unlocking it.

He didn't have time. Eberwolf might summon his scroll at any point and Darius needed to check the photo album because if there's one thing Eberwolf is big on its photos, and Darius needed to see if there were any recent photos of Hunter and Darius *needed* to see him-

He…

Darius' fingers hovered over the most recent video, showing Hunter and Eberwolf visiting him in the hospital.

Hunter.

Darius swallowed, his fingers shaking as he released the scroll, watching as it hovered in front of him. He lifted his hand and hesitated, biting his lip as he looked at how empty and sad his boy's eyes looked.

Before he clicked play.

"Alrightie!" Eberwolf smiled widely as he sat down on the bed, motioning Hunter to wave into the camera. Hunter managed one amused huff, his fingers waving at the camera before he dropped it, his eyes back on Darius' sleeping form. "Day 15! Here's to hoping Darius gets up soon!"

Darius felt his heart plummet as he paused the video, quickly checking how long ago it was filmed before opening up Eberwolf's calender.

The video was from a week ago.

The video was from a **week** ago.

Darius licked his lips and felt for a chair, pulling it out behind him to sit as he let the scroll go again.

(It's been a week it's been a week it's been a week)

He opened back up the video and swallowed, his eyes burning as he watched Hunter's crestfallen expression fall even further-

"Yeah," and Hunter's voice hadn't sounded that sad, that small in years- *"Here's to hope, right?"*

"Right!" And the amount of optimism and joy radiating off Eber wasn't normal, which means… *"How about we tell him what's happened in the past few days, okay?"*

Eberwolf was holding it together. Here Darius was, *barely* functioning when he had left Eberwolf to take care of Hunter alone, after *his* stunt?

(Eberwolf was always better at this than he was.)

Hunter inhaled and exhaled quietly, reaching for Darius' right hand. (And Darius rubbed his right palm gently, imagining Hunter's hand tracing it.) *"Well, I... it's been a few days since we- uh… visited. Eberwolf should've gone on his own, you know you could've right-?"*

"Of course, Hunter!" Eberwolf waved Hunter's concern offhandingly, but that was a **lie,** and he was sure Hunter could tell. *"Keep going!"*

Hunter scratched the back of his head, his frown deepening as he stared at Darius' barely rising chest. "…Okay. Um… I got that job with Mr. Clawthorne. I know you said not to worry about it, but it **feels** *different now that I have it, y'know? And Camila wanted to do something to celebrate so she said when you wake up, we're all invited to her house for a party."*

"And I already said yes!" Darius huffed, because he could imagine the wide grin that was spreading across Eber's face.

"And Eber said yes," Eberwolf seemed to wilt at Hunter's dejected tone, but it was the boy's sniffle that caught his attention

again. *"S-so you have to wake up. You'll… you'll come, because you promised we would do something fun when this whole thing was over.* ***You- you promised."***

His own eyes began filling with tears as Hunter's eyes grew shinier, and Eberwolf moved to his side and hugged him tight. Hunter sobbed and Darius was right there, not reacting-)

"You promised," Hunter cried, letting his hand go in favour of pulling his hair, ignoring Eber's alarmed chirp and attempts to stop him. "Y-you promised. And I don't know how I can apologize or ever be ***good enough-"***

"Cub no. Please, this wasn't your fault you were only trying to help-"

Eberwolf yelped as a slap echoed across the room, his head snapping to the side.

(Darius could feel his hands moving to his mouth, but it didn't feel real.

None of this did.)

"YOU CAN'T KEEP SAYING THAT!" Hunter snapped, his hands balling into fists as he snarled. (But the Little Prince was just sad, why was he suddenly so upset?) *"YOU CAN'T KEEP LYING TO ME! SAY YOU HATE ME ALREADY! SAY IT!"*

Eberwolf looked over at the camera-and gave Darius the perfect view of how tired the demon was- and reached towards it.

"Don't. Touch the stupid scroll."

"Darius is going to watch that after Cub. We can try this again next time we visit."

A deranged laugh spilled from Hunter's lips, coughs quickly overwhelming him. Eberwolf slowly approached him as Hunter slid to the floor, bringing his knees to his chest and burying his head in it, whispering something as he shook his head.

Eberwolf guided Hunter into his lap, gently brushing Hunter's hair away from his face as the demon shushed him.

"Never mad, never mad Cub, I love you. Not your fault, not your fault."

"But I-I… shouldn't have done that."

"I'm not mad baby, I love you. And I will say this forever. This wasn't your fault."

Hunter slowly sat up and angrily rubbed his tears away, reaching up to gently interlock his fingers with Darius' own. "I wanted to help."

"I know."

"I-I didn't mean it."

"I know."

"You," and Hunter finally looked at Eber, his lips wobbling. "You should hate me. He should hate me."

Eberwolf remained silent for a moment, his eyes seemingly transfixed on the way Hunter's fingers tightened around Darius' own. "We never will. No matter what happens. We both love you too much to ever hate you."

And Hunter scoffed, even as Eberwolf began purring. "Maybe you should."

"Maybe you shouldn't. Hunter is a very wonderful boy. I bet if you were nicer to him, you would love him too."

Hunter turned to stare at Eber, before reaching a hand out. Eberwolf walked towards him and sat on his lap, his purrs getting louder as he nuzzled Hunter under the boy's chin.

"I hate Dad right now."

(His breaths caught in his throat, and he felt something shatter at his core.)

Eberwolf hummed, leaning up to kiss Hunter's cheeks. "You're allowed to."

"I hate **you** *right now."*

Eberwolf paused, before he kissed Hunter again, nodding. "You're allowed to feel that too."

"Heh," Hunter shook his head, scooping Eberwolf up as he sat on the bed, looking at Darius' (useless, weak) body, before lying down, wrapping Darius' arm around them both. "And you're not

earning any favours with that endless patience."

Eberwolf shrugged, snuggling closer to Hunter. "I know."

"You did something so the hospital staff wouldn't kick us out if I yelled."

"Muting spell. No one can hear us."

They stayed silent after that, before Hunter turned towards Darius and began fiddling with his braids. "Would you have done it?"

"Hmmm?"

"Would you have done what Darius did?"

Eberwolf closed his eyes and exhaled, his purrs getting louder. "I think you know the answer to that."

Hunter froze before he gently brushed a strand of hair away from Darius' face, shivers overtaking his body, his hand moving to cover his mouth. "I-I'm a mess."

Eberwolf moved again, kissing Hunter's forehead, carefully nuzzling against him. "That's okay."

"Th-this is my fault."

"It's not."

"I hit you."

"Been hit worse."

Hunter inhaled shakily, a broken laugh tumbling out. "I- I keep crying and laughing and being ***weird."***

"Probably because you refused to let yourself do any of that before now."

Hunter buried his head under Darius' neck (and Darius hugged himself tight and if he imagined hard enough, he could feel Hunter smile under his arms) and exhaled, quieting down. "The-the video…"

"Enough?"

A desperate nod and Eberwolf reached towards the camera-

And it disappeared in a flash of orange.

Darius blinked at the empty space in front of him, his nose running as he suddenly sniffled, rubbing the tears away.

Time was up.

Darius expected he would feel *something* when he could finally see Hunter again. He expected relief, knowing Hunter was safe.

But there was a heavy, suffocating feeling resting on his chest and it had nothing to do with panic.

Guilt.

He shouldn't feel guilty. He *shouldn't.* Darius would do it again in a heartbeat and Eberwolf had literally just admitted to it too.

Darius won. Hunter was safe. Sure, the kids shouldn't have come, but they were only trying to help. And Darius wasn't proud enough to not admit that they were helping.

But they *were* winning. They were fine without the kids. None of them needed help.

(But Darius would be a hypocrite if he didn't admit that he would've done the exact same thing.)

But Hunter was safe and he was okay and that was what mattered in the end, not his useless, useless…

And Darius could feel the train of thought ending as he walked into the living room, walking into the aftermath of what was absolutely a fight as he collapsed face first onto the couch.

(Eberwolf would let Hunter get all his frustrations out. *He would.)*

Because Darius *had* known this would hurt Hunter. He had known in the split second before he moved to take the hit, and he had known it even in his panicked state. He had known, in all the ways he knew his boy *he had known* that if he died, Hunter would hate *himself* forever.

Darius would've hated himself if he hadn't come back. Darius would've hated himself, if he became a martyr for his boy, because the Little Prince deserved the Isles and everything in it, and that included…

Him.

(A father that was alive.)

And Darius *knows* grief, wears it in his name, in his wrinkles, and keeps it in his closet. Grief was a constant companion for years, and he remembered the hatred that had settled within his bones that never quite left, and Darius had always been jaded and sarcastic and too much but he thinks it was that that tipped the scale into him being cruel.

Hunter should never be cruel.

Hunter should never have to know the grief of feeling like everyone you loved most was leaving you, because Darius was someone that Hunter cherished and he had almost left him when he didn't even have to, when he could've made a better choice- *should've.* It was all a whirlwind of panic and a feral need to protect *and he still doesn't regret it,* but he would never rest easy knowing the pain this would've caused Hunter. He would never, not until Hunter had grown old and joined him, and he could finally apologize.

(Even then. He would never forgive himself for giving Hunter the pain he's been struggling with for years.)

Darius had another chance. He wasn't sure how many chances he would get (how many chances he deserves), but he had one. He could still make this right.

And when a familiar sound hit his ears, Darius sat up as the gold began to fade away. Brown eyes stared into his as Hunter panted, his hands moving to grip his shirt. Darius pushed himself up just as the door fell off its hinges, Eber's frantic breathing the only sound in the room until Darius heard a whimper.

"Hunter," Darius whispered as he stood up, freezing as Hunter flinched away from him. "It's okay."

Hunter was still staring, his ears curling back as he shook his head. "D-Darius?"

Darius watched as Hunter shivered from his spot and sighed, standing still. "I don't regret what I did Little Prince," he didn't know what he was doing, saying, but he had a chance so he needed to use it- "But I am so so sorry that I hurt you as much as I did. I can never apologize enough for making you think that any of it was your fault. For almost… almost making you watch me die."

"You…" and Hunter let out a shaky gasp, shaking his head slowly. "You-you-you… you're here?"

"I *needed* to see you and apologize. To Eberwolf, you too, but Hunter, you can hate me all you want, but I'm okay now, and I am so sorry-"

Another flash of gold completely knocked him over, bowling him to the floor as Hunter burst into *wails.*

"Hunter! Little Prince I'm here, I'm here it's okay-!"

Hunter pushed himself up, ugly tears and snot dripping down his face, a smile slowly growing as he shook his head. Darius watched as Hunter covered his mouth and *laughed,* a sound that sounded right, letting out another sob as he stared at Darius.

"I love you Dad," Hunter breathed out, before tackling him again, wrapping his arms around his neck so tightly *it hurt* but Darius didn't feel it as Hunter let out a breathless laugh, his body vibrating in pure mirth. "AND YOU'RE ALIVE!"

Darius slowly began smiling as he wrapped his arms around his son and *squeezed,* nodding as he listened to Hunter shout in his ears, only noise left. There was a thump near him and he turned to Eberwolf, watched the demon's eyes slowly grow mistier from the doorway, watching over them like he always did. Darius reached out as Hunter began howling and Eberwolf blinked at his hand, snapping out of whatever daze he was in. Eber shook his head and looked away, but he turned back around just as quickly, rushing over to them and tackling them.

"Why," and there was laughter in Eber's voice, lighter than anything Darius had heard in a long time- *"Did you not call. I would've come get you."*

Darius pulled Eberwolf close and Eber nuzzled him, and he laughed as Eber playfully licked his forehead. "W-what?"

"Call. Would've spared everyone the heart attack."

Darius blinked slowly, realization dawning over him. "… Oh. I forgot."

"...I'm sorry, you forgot?"

"Shut up," Darius shoved Eberwolf away, even as he felt Hunter laugh and embrace him tighter. "I'm still drugged. Probably."

Hunter hugged him again before sitting up, pulling Darius with him. Darius dropped his head on Hunters', kissing it gently as Hunter placed a hand on his chest. "You need to get back to the hospital."

"I have everything I need right here."

"Darius, we love you, but no you don't."

"I do," he suddenly snapped, bringing Hunter into his lap. "Neither of you were there."

Hunter's hand intertwined with his as he lay his head atop Darius' shoulder, exhaling shakily. "We'll… we'll stay then. I'll stay if Eber can't-"

"I'm staying."

"We're both staying then. We will," Hunter sniffed as he gently nuzzled the crook of Darius' neck and Darius kissed him again, reveling in the fact that he still *could.* "Sorry you had to wake up without us."

Even now, Darius hummed, his body resting more and more on Hunter's as the adrenaline wore off. "Never do that again."

"Darius?"

"Hmmm?"

"C'mon," and he could hear Eber's chuckle as his family helped him up, gently guiding him until he was lying down on something. ***"You** never do that again."*

Darius nodded as Hunter lay beside him and Darius wasted no time in hugging his boy close again, sighing as he listened to the rush of wind as they took flight, before he remembered something.

"This wasn't your fault Hunter," and Hunter stiffened, but Darius hugged him close again, humming. "It really wasn't."

Hunter paused, shuffling closer to him. "I'll… I'll try to believe that. When you're better. Okay?"

"Okay," and this would haunt Hunter, maybe for a long while, but Darius was here now, and he could help.

"I love you, Hunter."

There was silence around them for a heartbeat before he heard the whispered-

"I love you too Dad."

(And sometimes, Darius feels like the space between his ribs is still holding onto all that anger and hate, even when he's moved on. But sometimes, Darius could almost feel the love filling in the cracks left behind, making his chest lighter, *happier.*

And sometimes, Darius was afraid of it changing back, if anything ever happened to Hunter and Eber.

But sometimes, Darius thinks that everything was going to be okay.)

Family Dinner

Angelcloves

More than anything, Hunter wanted to talk. He wanted to tell the whole story of his time in the Human Realm, but Darius insisted that he get some sleep before he explain anything. He looked so tired, and Darius wasn't about to let him continue his bad habits after Belos was gone.

The spare bedroom was a little dusty, which was understandable, but luckily the Deamonne home hadn't been too damaged by Belos taking over the Titan. Hunter slept for the first time in days, and it was certainly welcome. Sleeping on a soft bed beneath as many blankets as he wanted was a foreign experience, but an appreciated one nonetheless.

He was only awoken by the smell of food cooking. He tried to get himself to go back to sleep, assuming he would have to cook for himself later, but Darius knocked on the door gently instead.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but I made dinner," Darius whispered, doing what he could to not let too much light in. Hunter had noticed that the sun had gone down already. "How long have I been out?" he murmured.

"Eight hours," Darius responded softly. "It's okay if you need a little more sleep afterwards. You can eat in your pajamas. I don't have a problem with that. I'm not dressed particularly well, either. You've been through a lot."

Hunter sat up and rubbed his eyes, getting out of bed and stepping right into the pair of slippers Darius left him."Thank you for cooking," he said, following Darius to the kitchen and taking the spot at the small table he was offered. The food was already plated up for him.

"There's plenty more if you finish all that. I tried to keep it simple and healthy. I had to work with what I could get my hands on with short notice. Once I get the pantries restocked, then I can make some tastier things, but spices don't go bad easily, at least," Darius explained, placing a napkin atop his lap and trying to comfort Hunter with a soft voice.

Hunter seemed soothed somewhat by the simply cooked meal in front of him. It was mostly vegetables, but he managed to secure a few decent cuts of meat that seemed to be slow cooked. It was fork-tender and fully saturated with flavor. "You're a good cook," he mumbled.

Darius smiled tenderly from across the table. "I could teach you some tricks to help you learn better, if you'd like," he offered.

Hunter shifted in his seat. "Can we talk?" he asked softly. "About everything that happened?"

Darius' smile faded somewhat. "After you're done eating and have some time to absorb everything. When we can take some time to cry and work through it. Then you can go right back to sleep with some catharsis and a full stomach," he said. "There's no good in denying it happened, but we want to make sure we're prepared to dredge those thoughts back up. Crying into a plate of rice isn't going to help much."

Hunter nodded slowly and continued to eat. Darius tried to offer more in an attempt to help him sleep better, but he didn't seem to be very hungry once he finished his plate.

"Can I do the dishes?" Hunter asked.

Darius had an abomination set about the housework instead.

“No need. Not tonight,” he responded. “Okay. Let’s talk about it.”

He led him to the sofa and had him sit, giving him a pillow to latch onto. Hunter was nervous. It was so visible in the way he wiggled around and had a hard time looking Darius in the eye. “I really missed you,” he managed to choke out.

Darius rubbed his back tenderly, making sure he knew he safe. “I missed you, too, Little Prince. I could hear your voice on the Day of Unity. I’m so glad you’re here with me now,” he told him softly.

Hunter started to whimper, but Darius kept rubbing his back and hushing him gently. “Flapjack died,” he said. “He died trying to save me.”

Darius had figured that out already. Hunter was inseparable from his little birdie. “He would be so happy to know you’re alright, Hunter,” Darius said, “To know that you’re safe in a home that wants you, and that you’re going to be able to grow into such a sweet young witch. He may not have seen it, but Belos is gone. You’re going to be alright. We’ll get through this. And I won’t let you do it alone.”

Hunter couldn’t help but start to cry at that point. Darius provided shelter in his arms and brushed his fingers through his hair while hushing him. “I’m so scared,” he sobbed. “I-I thought Belos was dead last time, but-, he wasn’t! Darius, what if he’s going to come back?”

“I will go to the ends of the world to make sure he can’t lay a finger on you again,” Darius assured him. “If he comes back, he’s going to have to get through me first.”

Hunter latched right onto Darius, trying to hide his tears as best he could, although he at least felt safe enough to have an emotional outburst at the time. “He got me, and I wasn’t even paying attention... He was in my body, and there was nothing I could do about it!” he cried.

Darius hadn’t inferred that part. He ran the pad of his thumb over Hunter’s cheek, noting where the edge of the scar used to be and how it had spread all the way up to the bridge of his nose now.

“I felt so helpless...,” Hunter whimpered, his voice breaking while Darius pulled a decorative throw blanket around his shoulders.

He didn’t know what else to say. He just held him and tried to pat his back in a desperate attempt to soothe some of his sobbing. “It’s over now,” he cooed. “Let’s get you back to bed. I’ll make sure to tuck you in and have a guard abomination posted inside and out, just so you know you’re safe. Feel free to call for me.”

Hunter sniffled and nodded while Darius guided him to his feet and walked him back to his bedroom. “Thank you for cooking,” he said, wiping away the last of his tears, but maintaining a weepy disposition.

“The calories will help you sleep better. If you have any preferences down the line, do let me know. I’ll accommodate them as best I can, once some more infrastructure work can be done,” Darius said. “But you don’t need to worry about all of that right now. Just focus on growing up strong for now. Think of how proud Flapjack would be.”

Hunter nodded and let Darius get him settled in bed with a kiss on the forehead and an introduction to the short abomination that would be stationed inside his room for him.

“If you’re still scared, please come get me. Do not be afraid to wake me up. It’s not too juvenile. Sound good?” Darius asked.

Hunter nodded and let Darius remove his hands from him. “Good night,” he mumbled.

“Good night, Little Prince,” Darius responded, smiling so gently at him. “I’ll see you later.”

Time Flies

msbadatnamingthings

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"Hunter! Dinner's ready!" Darius called as he began plating the food.

"In a minute!" Hunter called back, though Darius was dubious about that. Whenever Hunter got involved in a new project, he practically had to be torn away from his work station to remember other tasks, such as eating.

"OW! Owowowowow!" Loud thumps descended down the stairs. Without turning, Darius waved a spell circle, reducing what would have been a loud 'thud' to a soft 'squish.' Sure enough, when he turned, Hunter had landed in a pillow of abomination goo at the stairs' landing, a blue jay tugging at his front strand of hair.

"Waffles!" Hunter scolded the bird. He brushed loose threads and fabric scraps from his work apron. "I said I was coming down in a minute."

"You tend to get a bit distracted, Little Prince. Besides, I wanted to have one last night with you before you go away to camp for a week." Darius put the serving bowl on the table to ruffle Hunter's hair. Waffles fluttered up on his shoulder, and Darius gave her head a little scratch with his finger. "Thank you for watching out for him, Bluebell."

"This project is important, Darius! I don't wanna lose momentum." Hunter, despite his insistence, sat down across from Darius and fixed himself a plate.

"Well, I hope it's not as important as your packing. You need to get there early tomorrow," Darius playfully chastised.

"It's only our team uniform!" Hunter reached into his pocket and pulled out a scrap of yellow fabric. It had two letter E's in the middle, surrounded by a green squiggle outline and sparkles. "I wanted to make our logo so we don't have to borrow the camp's uniforms."

"Very impressive." Darius inspected the logo, noting how much cleaner Hunter's stitching had gotten during the year. "And wise to avoid clothes that have been passed around." He shuddered thinking about the stinky spare gym uniforms unfortunate students at Hexside had to wear when they forgot their athletic clothes at home. "I'm sure your friends will be very excited."

"They need to be more than excited, they need to be wowed," Hunter explained as he stuffed the fabric back in his work apron. "When I see the Emerald Entrails at flyer derby camp, I wanna make a good first impression!"

Darius looked up from his plate. "First impression? I thought you were on Hexside's team already. Why reintroduce yourself?"

Hunter suddenly went quiet. Darius looked up from his plate. "Little Prince?" More silence. "Hunter."

"Okay, I'm not actually on the team, okay?!" Hunter snapped. His eyes briefly flitted from frustration to fear, and he dropped his head to his hands folded in his lap. "Sorry, Darius."

Sighing, Darius stood up and took the seat next to Hunter. "Do you want to tell me why?"

"I just…I wanted to wait until I got settled into school. Then I started helping Dell after school with the palismen, then I wanted to spend some time with Waffles one-on-one, then…"

"Always something else coming up, eh?" Darius interjected,

and Hunter nodded silently. He put an arm around Hunter's chair. "You know, it seems from what you told me, those friends of yours were very understanding."

"Willow and Gus, yeah. But I haven't really talked to Viney or Skara, about, you know…" Hunter trailed off, hands idly touching the charm of his necklace: a bright red bird. "And then the flyer derby team kept growing, and growing, and that just meant more people to explain what happened to me."

"Hunter, you don't owe people your pain. Even if you like them." Darius explained gently. "You can just say 'I had some complications, and I don't want to talk about it right now.' And they'll understand."

Hunter looked up with sad, doe-brown eyes. "You think so?"

Darius patted Hunter on the head. "I know so." Hunter leaned into his side, and eventually Waffles landed on top of his head as well for the group hug.

Hunter sighed. "We are gonna have a long day tomorrow."

Darius looked at him, surprised. "Why's that?"

"Don't you remember?" Hunter quirked an eyebrow. "Parents have the information and safety meeting tomorrow."

Information and safety. That's all there was to it. Sit in the meeting, listen to a speech about information and safety, maybe grab a refreshment and make a beeline for the door. It would be quick, easy, and painless.

At least, that's what Darius told himself.

He pushed the doors open to the camp's recreation hall. Dozens of parents were conversing by refreshment tables (emphasis on were—when they turned to see Darius walk in, they either gawked or continued their conversations in hushed tones).

"Are you Darius Deamonne?"

Darius bristled as a woman approached him. "Uh, yes?"

"Perfect! The Emerald Entrails parents are over here."

Before he could protest, he found himself pulled along into a cluster of other parents. "My daughter is on the team with Hunter, he talks all about you."

The abomination on top of his head flicked in curiosity. "He does?"

"Everyone!" The woman waved at a cluster of people. "We have another parent to add to our group."

"Darius." His name was spoken before the woman could introduce him. Darius turned around to see who it was. It was a shorter man, who nodded at him. "It's been a while."

"Yes, it has…" Darius trailed off, hoping the man would fill in the blank with his own name. When he didn't, the last 's' in Darius' sentence dragged out uncomfortably. "Jerry?"

"Perry," the man corrected shortly. "Perry Porter. I was in your graduating class at Hexside?"

"Perry! Yes!" Darius inwardly cringed at his flub. "Well, it's kind of like a class reunion here, isn't it?" He chuckled, hoping everyone would join in. They didn't. In fact, they seemed to be avoiding the conversation between the two of them, all turned away from them towards one another.

"You never *came* to class reunions," Perry said curtly. "You were always busy with the covens."

"Alright, parents!" The speaker clapped their hands together. "Take a seat, and we'll get started on the presentation."

Phew, Darius thought. He found the most isolated seat from the others, in the back corner. Crossing his legs, he trained his eyes on the front of the room to avoid looking at anyone else. And of course, right when the presentation began, he heard the creak of a cheap plastic chair next to him.

"So," Perry whispered. "How is Hunter?"

"Fine," Darius said, tight-lipped.

"I had no idea you two were so close," Perry remarked, eyes pointed down. "You always seemed so aloof at those coven press releases. Not speaking with anyone else."

“Well, I was trying to be professional.”

“Hmm.” Some silence passed between them. “What made you realize what Belos was really doing?”

Darius looked around, feeling a dampness on his brow. “There were some…complications.” He coughed. “I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“Huh,” Perry huffed. “Just like you could never talk for an interview.”

“I was trying to keep a low profile,” Darius mumbled. “And what is it with you being so nosy?”

“Because I want to know who I’m dealing with.” For the first time since he sat down, Perry made steely eye contact with Darius. “You were part of the empire that nearly destroyed us all.” Perry crossed his arms. “That nearly made me lose my son, Augustus.”

“Well, that makes two of us.” Perry raised his eyebrows, which annoyed Darius more. “What, you think coven heads got special privileges on the Day of Unity? Well, we didn’t. And I almost lost Hunter. Multiple times.”

Perry slumped down, the fury in his gaze dulling into shame. While it was deserved for his repeated prodding, Darius couldn’t help but feel bad about scolding his old friend.

“Alright, parents!” The speaker interrupted the whispers, thankfully. “Let’s come up with some good cheers for when our campers play! Does anyone have any good ones?”

The room went quiet, spare a few coughs.

“Okayyy.” The speaker seemed to pick up on the tension in the room. “Well, the campers are practicing, why don’t we watch them from here for the big game next week!”

Immediately an illusion was projected in the air. Dozens of children were flying on their palismen, scenes switching of them grabbing flags and flinging spells.

“Those are our kids!” A parent called out.

“That’s what you’ll be seeing when they play their big tournament at the end of the week!” The speaker confirmed. “Why don’t you practice cheering them on?”

There was some silence. Shoes shuffled on the floor, unsure on who should start.

“Go Willow!” A man with a beard called out.

“Good old Harvey,” Perry chuckled to himself.

“Willow Park’s father?” Darius asked.

“One of two. Gilbert is his husband, they’re both very sweet.” Speaking of which, Gilbert, a man with bifocals, came over to both of them to grab them by the hands. “Come on, Entrails parents, let’s cheer!” Darius soon found himself in a whirlwind of other parents cheering on the illusion as if it were real. He scoffed.

And then he saw Hunter.

The illusion of him was a little younger than when he started camp, but it was still striking how much it resembled Hunter. It even flew the same way as him.

“Come on,” Darius muttered. “Come on, Entrails.”

“That’s the spirit!” Harvey playfully punched Darius in the shoulder. “Entrails, Entrails!”

The chant continued, and Darius found himself echoing the chant as well. The stress from earlier melted away with the cheers, and even Perry seemed to crack a smile at him.

“Come on, you can do this!” Darius said, louder than before. The illusion of Hunter ebbed and flowed like a creek, flying around the other players. “Come on!”

The illusion Hunter reached for another player’s flag, but missed narrowly. Soon after, a large shot of abomination nearly knocked him off his palisman as it took Willow out.

“Willow!” Gilbert and Harvey cried out in worry.

“NO MORE PLAYING AROUND! AVENGE YOUR FRIEND! FINISH THEM!” Darius roared. When catching his breath, he looked around the room.

The bewildered faces were enough to be embarrassed about, but there was something off. Everyone seemed to be several feet

taller in his abomination form.

"Um." Darius shrunk down to his humanoid form. "I'm going to be late for work." He paused once more. "Goodbye."

He walked out too quickly for anybody to point out it was the weekend.

———

"Eber, I think I've forgotten how to talk to people." Darius was draped over the couch, a cool towel resting atop his forehead.

Eberwolf scampered over. They gave Darius's head a curious whiff.

"That's different, it's work! We weren't exactly meeting the coven heads for apple blood after hours," Darius groaned. Eberwolf crawled to the top of the couch, chittering.

"I know Raine was on our side! That doesn't mean they have great social skills." He threw an arm in the air for emphasis. "You know how bad their tunnel vision is with other people. If they weren't such a horrible actor they would have shut us out completely."

Eber poked his forehead with a clawed finger.

"What do you MEAN I'm one to talk?!" Darius shot up indignantly. In rising too quickly, he banged his elbow on the armrest, eliciting a quiet curse.

"He's not wrong, you know."

Darius turned his head to the doorway of the rec room. A familiar frame leaned on the doorway, hands in the pockets of a dirty apron. The sun glinted off those annoyingly familiar, purple goggles sitting on a mass of scruffy brown hair.

"Oh, it's *you*," Darius sneered. He pulled the towel over his eyes. Looking between the two, Eberwolf scuttled into the crevices of the breakroom, wanting no part of their squabble. "What do you want, Alador?"

"I kept hearing you sighing from the laboratory." Alador sat down in the chair adjacent to the couch. "You're more dramatic than usual."

"Don't you have things to do?" Darius waved him off. "Like being a hack?"

Alador pressed his lips together. "We used to be close, Darius. We're working together to fix this whole coven mess. What other issue could you have with me?"

"Oh, please, I know how easily swayed you are." Darius sat up, pushing the towel off of his face. "You let Odalia carry you away from all of us in that business scheme you didn't even want."

All friendly curiosity vanished from Alador's face, being replaced with a scowl. "Watch it."

"Like you watched your kids?" Darius retorted. "You think I don't know how you treated your children prior to the Day of Unity? Hunter is friends with your youngest. How should I trust anything you say?"

That seemed to be the finishing blow to Alador's pride. "Amity is talking to me again," he said, almost defensively. "Emira is speaking with me, Edric…"

"Not so much?"

Nodding, Alador slouched. Feeling an invasive pang of sympathy, Darius sighed and turned to Alador. "How did you get so carried away in all that?"

"It just felt easier, I suppose. I know it was cowardly, but I don't want to be like that anymore." Alador looked at Darius. "Why did you stay in the coven after you knew what was happening?"

The question caught Darius off guard. "I thought about leaving after my mentor…but I couldn't leave Hunter alone. Even before I could talk to him, I knew he would need someone when he was older." He rubbed his goatee. "And now I'm trying to be there for him with this camp, but I just seem to tick all those parents off." It was silly, but Darius felt like he was letting Hunter down all over again. If he couldn't stop the Day of Unity, how could he help his new son with something as mundane as camp? What example was

he setting?

Not much for emotional support, Alador slapped his knees and stood. “Well, I suppose we both have some adjusting to do. Good luck with your camp.”

“Good luck with your children,” Darius said in return, though not unkindly.

Alador nodded. “I’d only hope to be as good a father as you.”

And he walked away.

Exhausted, Darius flopped back on the couch, putting the towel over his eyes once more.

SQUAWK! CLUNK! A crow phone burst through the window, startling Darius out of his supine state once more.

“Darius! Darius!” The sound of a raspy voice blared as the crow line opened its beak, its distilled, high-pitched sunshine impossible to mistake for anyone else.

He sighed. “Hello, Little Prince.” Hearing Hunter, the corners of Darius’ mouth upturned. “How is camp?”

“Amazing! Everyone was super nice at the flyer derby meeting.” Hunter’s voice cracked in the way he would excitedly deluge about something wonderful that had happened to him, whether it was reading his favorite book or discovering an interesting, mystical beast (Eber was still banking on a trip to the human realm to see these ‘wolves’). “You were right, I had nothing to be scared of!”

“That’s wonderful.” Darius sat up. “I’m happy for you, Hunter.”

“But what about you? How was the parent’s thing?”

“Oh! That.” Darius sat upright, even though Hunter wasn’t in the room. “It was…fine.”

“That’s good! I wasn’t sure since Gus called his dad on the crystal ball, who was kind of quiet about it—”

Darius flinched at the mention of Perry, a good parent.

“But I’m happy you were able to get along with the others, too!”

“Yes, yes.” Scrunching his nose, Darius tried to suppress a grimace at his lie. “Oh, and how did they like the uniforms?”

“Oh, they loved them! They wanna—” A static noise crackled in through the line, interrupting Hunter. “I have to go, but I’ll see you soon! Bye!”

The crow line closed its beak. Darius sighed. “Bye.”

He rolled over on his side, hoping to nap. After a few moments, he felt a presence watching him. Opening his eyes, he stared at two ominous orange flashes of light illuminating a dark corner.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he grumbled. Emerging from the dark corner, Eberwolf looked at Darius with that prodding, cattish grin of his.

“What do you want me to do? Make shirts for the parents? That will never work.” Huffy, Darius flicked his cloak over himself. The stitches were done neatly, the same as when he made clothes a million times. Before he was a coven head, his clothes were how he stood out amongst his peers. His bold style choices, unable to be found in stores, were always conversation starters, very similar to how Hunter’s sewing was always a bit of an icebreaker. From the wolf shirt to his uniform, it seemed to be a safe lead into impending difficult conversations.

Darius looked at Eber once more. “Will it?”

The purple of Darius’s abomination hair flickered irritably; one would think it was going to shoot clean off of his head. It had been about a week of this; working and creating and stewing. Hunter being around kept Darius out of his head and less isolated, but he wasn’t going to bother him during his week at camp. They both needed space to be their own witches.

Finally, finally, the parents walked in. At the sight of Darius there early, they shuffled stiffly.

“Hello parents,” Darius waved stiffly.

They all looked at each other, unsure how to respond. Perry was the first to speak up. “Hello, Darius.”

“I wanted to, erm…” Darius cleared his throat, eyes trailing anywhere but Perry’s face. “I wanted to apologize for my behavior yesterday. There are things…things that are impossible for me to explain. But I can only imagine how you were all feeling seeing me again, reconciling between the past and the present. I promise this will not happen again.”

All the parents looked at each other, unsure of what to make of his statement.

Darius clapped his hands together. “Now. Onto more pressing matters. Our children will be competing today, so we must show our team spirit.” He took a deep breath, steeling himself. Somehow this part felt more nerve-wracking than the apology. Sucking in air, he opened his eyes as they glowed green.

Abomination geysers spewed out of the ground. Everyone shielded themselves with their arms, but stopped once they realized they were not covered in goop. Looking up, each parent had a purple package in front of them. Darius waited for them to open them, but they still stared at them tentatively. Sighing, he waved a spell circle to unfurl what the abomination packages held.

“What the…” Harvey picked up a long square of fabric that sat in front of them. It was orange with gold hemming, but it wasn’t that part that stood out. In the middle was a green jewel shining among a pile of guts. The writing was as follows: My Witch is an Emerald in the Entrails.

“It’s based on a human expression. Diamond in the rough, I believe?” Darius explained. “And the other parents will probably just be wearing t-shirts, but I thought that was so… unoriginal. Besides, it’s easier to size for cloaks than shirts.”

With a wave of his hand, another sweep of magic transformed his pink cape into an orange one that matched the ones given to the parents. He stared at them with hopeful eyes, sweat beading on his brow. “What do you think?”

Everyone looked flabbergasted. And then, the worst of Darius’ fears came to fruition.

They started laughing.

“Forget it,” Darius said, in the aloof tone he used whenever he tried to hide his hurt. “I never spent that much time on it anyway.”

“No, Darius,” Perry chuckled. He grabbed Darius by the wrist and pulled him towards the other parents. “We love them.”

“Yeah, I can wave this like a flag to cheer on my girl!” Harvey agreed. He flapped his cloak in the wind while Gilbert wrapped his around his shoulders.

“It’s so warm, too!” he praised.

“Do you have any extras to give to my family? I’ll pay you!”

“Let’s wave them for when the kids come out!” Soon the direct lines were all caught in a cacophony of excitement.

“You are full of surprises, Darius.” Perry’s gaze softened. Putting his hands in his pockets, he sighed. “I think I owe you an apology as well. Being a reporter, being a father, I always want to make sure my son is safe. But I shouldn’t have ever doubted your integrity. Hunter is a wonderful kid.” He offered Darius a small smile. “He only could have gotten that from you.”

Darius scoffed. “Please, he’s wonderful all on his own.”

“But he needed guidance. Guidance you gave him.” Perry looked out on the field. “I shouldn’t have doubted your character. The emperor’s gone now.”

Darius exhaled. “I thought I could change things from inside the coven. Then when my mentor…passed away...” He swallowed, finally admitting even mildly what happened. “I knew I had to dig deeper to find the root of the problem, but I couldn’t let anyone get too close for their safety. But now that it’s over, I realize I’m out of touch.” He turned to Perry. “I’m sorry, Perry. I hope we can be friends despite myself.”

Darius held out his hand to be shaken. Perry looked down at his hand, and then met his eyes before taking his hand in a firm grip. A few seconds passed, and Perry yanked Darius’ hand to pull

him down into a bearhug.

"I kept thinking you were immune to the Emperor's Coven," Perry said. "But they hurt you, too." Perry looked up. "Darius-"

"Darius! Darius!" Hearing his name, Darius turned around and was greeted by a sunbeam. Perry backed away, smiling at him to greet his son.

"Hunter!" Darius moved towards him, and Hunter nearly knocked him over with the hug. "Don't you have an entrance to make with your team, Little Prince?"

"I do, but I wanted to say hi first." Hunter didn't have the wherewithal to look sheepish. Green makeup couldn't hide the excitement behind his dancing, bushy brows and bright brown eyes. "I missed you."

Darius chuckled. "I missed you, too." He ruffled Hunter's blond locks. "Now! Go with your team! I'll make sure you see me."

Saluting playfully, Hunter ran off to join the other kids. Darius smiled, then looked back at Perry. "We should probably go to the stands, shouldn't we?"

Smiling, Perry took stride next to Darius, walking together as they reached their spots.

"Darius?" Harvey approached him, other parents trailing behind him. "Can you do the thing?"

Darius raised an eyebrow. "What thing?"

"You know, the thing, with the—" He paused to refer to raise a hand above his head. "Abomination transformation?"

"We weren't actually upset with you when you did that," Gilbert added. "We love your enthusiasm, I wish we had said it earlier."

Looking out at the stadium, Darius saw they had more room towards the front. "Any of you afraid of heights?" The parents all shook their heads. "Alright, hang on tight."

Taking a deep breath, Darius blinked and his eyes turned black with green irises. He slowly rose in height, spawning the parents. He stared at them with hopeful eyes, sweat beading on his brow. "What do you think?"

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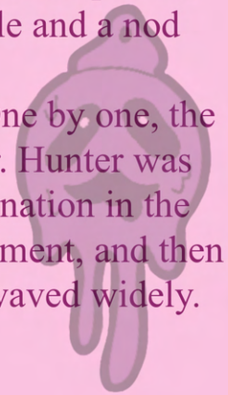
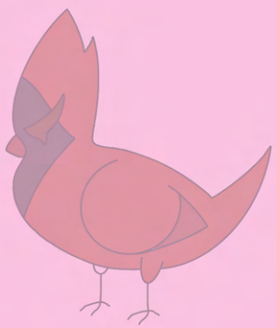
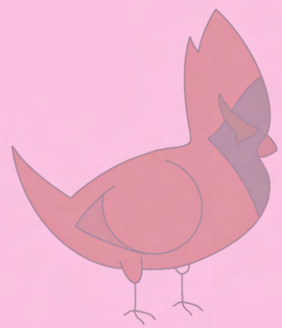
abomination platforms for the other parents. While concerned at first, they got used to them, laughing in delight at their perfect view. Looking to his right, Darius received a smile and a nod from Perry, which he returned.

"Now introducing…the Emerald Entrails!" One by one, the flyers came out on their palismen, circling the air. Hunter was focused on his laps before spotting the tall abomination in the sky that was his father. His jaw dropped for a moment, and then his face split into a wily, gap-toothed grin as he waved widely. Darius gave a large wave back.

"Let's go, Entrails!"







The Wallpaper Inside Your Heart is Slowly, Slowly Peeling Off

saotomexmary

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Trigger Warming: mentions of blood, and descriptions of a hand injury

Reflections have always been a tricky thing for Hunter. Even before everything came crumbling to dust, she was never one to seek out her own face in the mirror. She didn't think she really liked who she saw. She used to hate her appearance because she was taught not to value herself. She used to avoid mirrors because she could never stop feeling disappointment at the boy staring back at her when she looked at one.

And since Belos had no problems with that, why would she have bothered to think about it any further? She was the Golden Guard. She had her mask, and it never mattered what the face behind it looked like.

She knows who she is, now. For the most part, anyway. She isn't any of the ghosts haunting the paths she's left behind, not a Golden Guard, not a witch hunter, not an emperor's nephew. She's just Hunter. But she thinks about it sometimes— what Belos had said. She thinks about it quite a lot, actually.

Darius doesn't have pictures of his mentor, but Hunter still knows that man's face. The previous Golden Guard. She doesn't look anything like him.

She knows who she *does* look like- even though it's a face she's never known before. She's seen it, of course. The same blonde hair, straight and twisting up at its ends. The same sharp edges on their faces, the same hooked nose. His is a face she's glad she only knows from glimpses of the past, paintings of a time long gone.

But that satisfaction is hard to maintain when she's standing in front of a mirror, looking at her own face, a lock of blonde hair held between her fingers. She used to hate her appearance for a load of reasons, most of them untrue. She thinks she likes who she sees now— just like everything else, she can take what Belos wanted of her and make it her own.

Most of her appearance is nearly identical to how she looked before, honestly. All except her eyes, its original magenta now a deep brown— Flapjack's eyes. Brown, just like those of the man she was made after.

Hunter knows what it's like to miss someone while still finding a throbbing bitterness under your tongue, an almost cruel resentment. It's easier, almost, when it comes to Belos— dealing with the anger, the hurt, and the grief. But with Flapjack? *Titan.*

The anger tilting at the edge of her heart feels like an ugly, unfair beast inside her. How selfish does she have to be to be so resentful of a sacrifice that cost her friend his life, just because she doesn't enjoy how it changed her appearance?

She can see it so easily, her face morphing into that of a dead man, her features stretching and growing to fill its shape.

You looked the most like him.

Hunter is no stranger to anger, from herself or from those who used to surround her. And yet, she wasn't expecting it when

her hands closed into a fist and met the glass of the mirror.

It doesn't shatter like she had expected, leaving only a little hole, with jagged lines running out from it. Most of the shards have fallen onto the counter, but she sees a few small ones stuck in her skin, stained by the crimson of her own blood. It takes a couple more seconds for the pain to register, with the realisation of what she did crashing in at nearly the same time.

"Shit!" Hunter grabs her wrist tightly, holding her injured hand carefully over the sink.

A knock comes at the door, startling her enough she almost hit her knee on the counter as she jerks when she stands. She knew it was only inevitable that Darius would show up here with his concerns— she just hadn't expected him to be so quick. But maybe it's only natural, with the day they had. Besides, neither of them are quite used to this new arrangement yet. She tightens her grip around her wrist. "Yes?"

"I heard the noise from my room." Darius' voice carries clearly through the hard wooden door. "Are you doing alright in there?"

"Yes, I'm fine!" Hunter says automatically, muscle memory. She stops as she looks down at her hand, at her bloody, shaking fingers, catching herself. "Not really. I could use some help."

"May I come in?"

"Yeah."

Hunter hears Darius turning the knob of the door behind her, sees his figure standing in the doorway as he pulls it open. She turns her eyes back to herself. She has no desire to see Darius' face as he realises what she's done.

For his part, Darius doesn't say anything as he steps up beside Hunter. His footsteps are light and precise, like leaves falling on water. When he comes up beside her, she hears him inhale tightly, his body tensing for a second.

"May I?" Darius then says, gesturing at her hand.

"Mhm."

Darius reaches over with his hands, his fingers meeting her skin. She watches as a layer of abomination forms over his fingers, running over her own hand, picking up the pieces of glass in the cut wound. The touch is gentle, and she can hardly feel the sting of the removal.

You've been through worse, comes a voice from the back of her head. She tries not to pay it any mind, instead turning up your gaze to watch Darius' face.

He isn't looking at her, focus directed entirely at the mess she's made of her hand. As if feeling her gaze, his eyes lift to meet hers. His eyes are deep and gentle, laced with such worry in a way that makes Hunter want to kick herself for being the one to put it there.

"Feel free to say no, of course," Darius begins, soft. "But I wanted to ask a question."

"Sure." She doesn't mean to look away, turn to the floor, but she does. She closes her eyes and touches her elbow with her free hand. "Go on."

"Did this perhaps have anything to do with visiting Peter's grave earlier?"

It's strange how *that's* what elicits a small groan from her, while Hunter had managed to be silent while Darius was removing the shards from her skin.

"A little bit," she starts, cautious. She opens her eyes to meet Darius' gaze again. After a second, he gives her a small nod and a smile, then turns his head back down at her hand. Clearly meant for her benefit, so she can think through her words better. "But not exactly."

"Elaborate?"

The last piece of glass is picked out swiftly and as gently as all the rest were. Hunter watches silently as Darius turns around to the cabinet over the sink, where the bandages and ointments are. He grabs a roll of bandages— new, with the cover still wrapped over it.

"I-" Hunter sucks in a breath, stilling herself for what she

wants to say. It's still a difficult phrase to muster confidently. "I'd rather not."

Darius breaks open the wrapping, taking up the start of the thin fabric between his fingers. It glows with a soft blue as he touches it, rolling it out.

"Of course."

Just like that, the subject's dropped. Hunter has to remind herself it'll be like this from now on— simple, safe, easy. Any of the other words anyone could throw out. She likes how it sounds to say the word 'home' and have it *mean* something, for once.

They stand in silence as Darius wraps the bandage around her hand, which suits Hunter just fine. She watches the way the bandage envelopes her hand with a deep blue glow, followed by a rush that feels like cool water on skin. Another of the many things it'll take some time for her to get used to. It's hardly as if Belos would have ever given her anything like this.

With nothing better to do, she spares another glance at the mirror. Her reflection is crooked now, cracks causing little distortions, making her bigger, making her smaller, tilting her to the sides. Oddly enough, from where she's standing now, her hair almost looks longer.

Her hair is as short as it always was. She always liked it that way, the freedom of it, of being able to feel the air on the back of her neck. She always had the feeling Belos wanted it to be longer, though she never quite understood why. She's pretty sure she knows why now.

"Hey, Darius?" she says, after another couple of seconds looking into her own eyes.

"Yes?"

"Could I-?" She closes her free hand into a fist, then unclenches it. "I'd like to dye my hair. Could you help?"

She can almost *hear* Darius' face shifting as he slowly smiles. "Of course. We can do that in your room. Unless you'd prefer to do it here?"

The blue glow on the bandages dims, and Darius' fingers move to unwrap it from her hand.

"No, it's- thanks."

"It's no problem," he says, lifting the last of the fabric off her hand.

Hunter looks down at her hand, now good as new. She flexes her fingers slightly and sighs.

Darius wouldn't exactly call himself an expert at this sort of thing, though he'd say he thinks he's managing pretty well. He isn't sure himself if he's referring to this set up, or this whole arrangement. It's only been a couple of months since Hunter decided she wanted to live with Darius, but he'd say it's been a good couple of months.

Hunter is quiet as he works at setting up the dye for her, which suits him just fine. He spins the brush in the vial, watching the colour form slowly, a spiral of shifting rainbow hues. She's seated on a chair in front of her bed, fiddling with her scroll.

"How would you like to do this?" He asks, looking up from the vial.

"What?" Hunter looks up from her scroll, blinking.

"Any ideas how you want your hair done?"

Hunter shrugs quickly, almost as if as a reflex. She takes a particularly longer strand of hair between her fingers, pulls it down so she can see it before her own eyes. "Kind of," she says, after a couple seconds.

"Nothing too solid, though. Just…" Hunter releases her hold on her hair, turning and looking up at Darius. "It'd be nice to try something different."

"I understand. How about we start slowly?" He stands up to head over to the cabinet, where he's got some bottles of colour stored. "Any thoughts on the colour you'd like?"

"Red," Hunter replies, without a hint of hesitation. She doesn't

add anything else to it, though, so Darius decides against speculating aloud. Though he's pretty sure he knows why she picked that specifically.

"A beautiful colour," is all he says, instead. He finds the bottle he's looking for and picks it out, turning back to the vial brewing.

"Thanks?"

Darius scoffs, nudging her shoulder lightly as she passes her. He spills a few drops into the vial, watching the colours be overtaken by a deep, bright crimson.

"How does the colour look?" Darius asks, bringing the vial over to her.

"Looks great." Hunter doesn't say anything after that, just looking up at him expectantly. Just when he's decided to prompt her again, though, she seems to realise that he's about to do so, and speaks before he can. "I think just a bit of it, to start, maybe?"

"What do you mean?"

Darius watches as Hunter scrunches her eyes shut, like she's trying hard to envision something in her mind. When she opens her eyes again, she's turned her gaze to the floor, lifting her hands up to the side of her head.

"Sort of like a pattern, maybe?" She starts, making mirroring gestures on both sides of her head, drawing out little lines following the movement of her hair, little waves moving sideways down her scalp. "Little bits of red here and there. If that's alright."

"Of course it is."

"Right." Hunter turns her hands around in her lap. "Yeah."

Darius approaches behind her, brush and vial in his hands. Hunter spares a glance back at him, then moves back further into the chair, straightening her back.

"You ready for this?" He asks, drawing the brush up close to her head.

"As much as I'll ever be," she replies, teasing.

After that, as Darius begins to work on her hair, they remain mostly quiet. Hunter especially so, still seemingly a little rattled by the incident in the bathroom earlier. She only occasionally quips in to give Darius a few suggestions, and tell him how she would prefer something done. By the end of it, patches of her hair have been coated with that thick crimson paint, and a few droplets of it have ended up splashed on her face.

As Hunter retreats back into the bathroom to wash off the dye, Darius is left sitting in her room to ponder. Flashes of the day come rushing in his mind like a tide, of them before Peter's grave, of them in the woods, gathering flowers to lay before the stone.

When Hunter returns, her hair is still damp, but the results are clear to see. Darius finds that he registers the smile growing on her face much quicker than he does the aftermath of her hair, the bright red highlights at her sides.

"Forgive me for being presumptuous, but I'm going to guess that it's to your liking?"

Hunter laughs, loud and clear. She draws a hand up to her hair, running a strand between her fingers as she had done before. Though this time, it seems different. Lighter, like there's been a weight lifted off her shoulders.

"You could say that."

"I'm glad to hear that," he says, returning the smile in turn. "And I'm honoured you trusted me to help you with this."

Hunter's face shifts a little at that, her brows furrowing slightly as she tilts her head.

"You asked if I was upset because we went to visit your- Peter's grave earlier, right?" She then says, catching Darius off guard. "Back in the bathroom."

It takes him a couple of seconds to pull himself together and say,"I recall."

"Just now, I remembered something Belos had told me," she explains. "He said I looked the most like him. *Caleb.* The man he

made me from."

He nods. "And you decided you didn't want to look like him anymore?"

Hunter laughs, though this time it sounds a little sharper, like a scoff. "Something like that. I've never- I've never seen him before, obviously. But based off- y'know. He probably had brown eyes."

"Yours were magenta, before-" Darius finds himself starting to speak before he realises what he's doing. The back of his mind supplies what he had wanted to say, but didn't—*just like Peter's*. "I'm sorry for interrupting."

"No, you're right. Before Flapjack… yeah. They were."

Hunter sighs, runs a hand through her hair, brushing it away from her face.

"I'm grateful for what he did for me, obviously. But it's-" Hunter grips her shirt, at the spot above her heart. "I didn't get a choice, when it comes to what it did for me. I'm so sick of not getting to *choose* what happens to me."

Hunter walks forward, back to the chair she was sitting at before. She doesn't sit down now, instead gripping on to the top of its back rest.

"I *want* to carry a part of Flapjack with me. But not- not like that."

"Thus the red dye?"

"If I've learnt anything from Amity-" Hunter pauses, her face shifting, a hint of genuine laughter creeping back up onto her. "Well, okay. I've learnt a shit ton from her. But one of them is that just changing up your hair can be…"

"A massive triumph?"

"Yeah." Hunter's eyes widen, and she scoffs. "That." She stretches her arms out in front of her."But also. A reclamation, I guess."

He watches as Hunter circles around the chair before looking back up at him.

"You- back at Peter's grave, you mentioned that you used to be pretty angry with him. Because of how he left you."

"I was," he agrees. He wishes his voice hadn't gone so tight as he said that.

"Right. And you said you were guilty about that. Feeling angry, because…" Hunter just looks up at him, instead of continuing, eyes deep and sad. Darius reaches out to touch her shoulder. It's clear they both understand the point being made here, without her having to say it.

How could words begin to describe any of it? The bitter agony, the life wrenching grief, the never-ending guilt. To feel betrayed by the heaviest act of love someone could do for you is a special kind of selfishness, a type of unique nerve. A betrayal in and of itself.

Or maybe it's just the natural machinery of the heart. To love so deeply it turns into hatred. It's hardly something to be expressed in mere words— instead a sentiment shared through scars, above and below their skin.

"I know." Darius replies, anyway.

Hunter meets his gaze, and he knows she understands him truly. He can only hope that she can feel the same with him.

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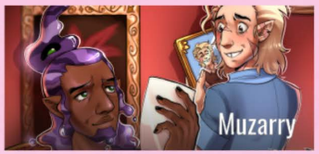

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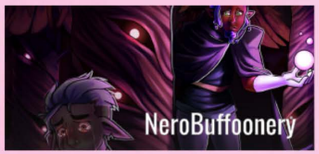

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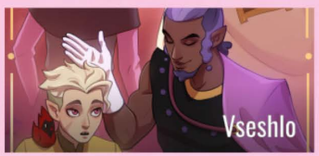

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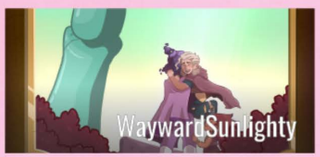

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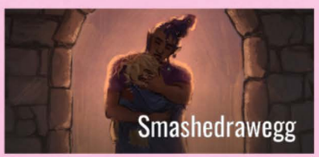

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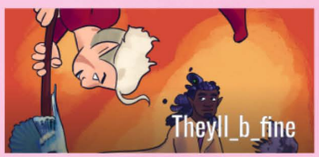

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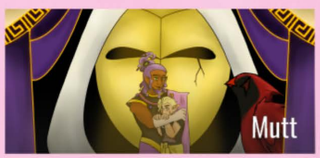

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